

Can't Find My Way Home

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Can't Find My Way Home

by [bramble_patch](#) ([Marianne_Dashwood](#)), [personalized_radio](#)

Summary

It's been a long two years of recovery. Recovery from the coup, from the betrayal, from the Nether. The five of them have finally settled into their new home and know peace.

Unfortunately, the world isn't done with them yet, and forces beyond a single throne threaten the happy life that they've built together.

As their peace is shattered, one thing is for sure; they're not interested in being torn apart again, and they're willing to do anything to get back home.

Notes

guess whose back, back again, guess whose back, tell a friend -

It's us! Back with a fully written sequel for you all, so be sure to subscribe so you don't miss an update!! We'll be updating weekly, every Wednesday, due to how long some of these chapters got, so the biggest of shoutouts to our wonderful beta, [Jess](#), for powering through them!

If you have no idea what we're on about, go read the last big entry in this series, When The Sunlight Dies, because this is a direct sequel to that (also it's pretty good but you didn't hear that from me :D)

Big love also to our discord (which you can find here! -> <https://discord.gg/HS6T3pbfTk>) to join and yell about the chapters as they are updated and also other fans - we're a lovely bunch, and we love to chat!

As always, our socials are linked below, so please let us know what you thought about this chapter in a comment and leave a kudos if you enjoyed!

We appreciate you all so much for coming on this journey with us a second time :D Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Dream's been careful not to leave behind evidence, no broken branches or pressed grass. He sticks to the trees, thick branches that carry his weight, emerald and cadmium and castleton that blend his cloak into nothing.

Night will be falling soon. He knows this forest well now, and he isn't far from his destination. He just has a bit further to go. He's lost track of his pursuers but he doesn't put it past them to have set traps ahead of him while he was trying to escape earlier. His ankle still aches slightly from his tumble out of the trees when a well-timed arrow had nearly taken him down. It was only by the grace of a well-placed stream and a willingness to play dirty that Dream had escaped his near-capture, but he hadn't done so unharmed and his ankle had significantly slowed his progress. It's why he's still in the forest as the sunlight begins to die out.

Still, he can't afford to be arrogant now. Another slip up like before and he might not recover again, especially so close to the end.

He spends the next twenty minutes picking his way through the forest canopy, leaping when he must but trying to swing when he can, or climbing across interlocking limbs with barely a rustle of leaves to accompany the transition. As he continues on with not a sound or sight out of place, he tries to remind himself not to get cocky but it's difficult. He'd left them behind in the stream, shouts and cries about mud and shifting rocks, but it's possible that they'd taken a more direct route to the edge of the forest than Dream, who was more concerned with safety and stealth than speed at the moment. It's been at least an hour since he's even heard anyone. He may simply bypass whatever trap they'd set, if they'd even made it this far yet.

Whatever the case, Dream doesn't have much time. There is barely half an hour of daylight left. He needs to pick up his pace.

Silently, Dream drops to the ground. Kneeling in the dirt, fingers brushing through blades of grass, Dream listens. There's only the quiet chirping of birds heading in for the night, the occasional groan of a wayward zombie that will quickly meet its end amongst the wild foxes and wolves that roam the trees. In the far distance, he hears the yipping of a fox calling its skulk.

He stands, adjusts his cloak, and begins his trek. With only half a mile left, it's going to be faster on the ground than in the trees, which start to thin out as he moves closer to the edge of the forest. As the canopy starts to separate more, the true colors of the sky - the deep reds and purples of sunset - become clear. Despite the stream setback, Dream is right where he needs to be at exactly the right time. If all goes to plan, he'll walk away from this with his head held high.

He keeps an ear out as he walks and it's only the half-instinct to be *aware* that gives him the warning he needs to drop to his belly. An arrow whizzes over him; aimed not at where his torso had been, but at where it would have been had he simply crouched.

“Oh, Dreeeeeeeeeam,” A familiar voice chants, “That wasn’t very smart of you. You should have run.”

Dream rolls as another arrow buries itself where he lay only a micro-second before, quickly finding his feet and cannonballing behind a thick trunk; “*George!* Those aren’t blunted!”

“If you’d wanted me to keep using my blunt tips, you would have let me shoot you three hours ago,” George says primly. Dream doesn’t fall for the bait of looking around the tree; he knows George will headshot him the second a hint of blond even pops into view.

“Maybe if you’d stopped bullshitting, you would have!” he laughs back, heart racing. “Where are the others?”

“They died. It’s just me, I’m afraid. Whatever will I do?”

George’s voice comes from his left and, with a sinking feeling, Dream’s eyes cut right. His instincts are correct; he’s being pincerd. He sees a slight gleam in the darkness, the gentle purple of the enchanted leather armor Karl had forced Quackity to wear. He looks forward, hoping to make his escape that way - and he sees Sapnap, smirking.

“Oh, Dream,” Sapnap coos, “Caught ya’.”

“You haven’t yet.” Dream glances up.

“Don’t let him -” Sapnap starts, but Dream bends his knees and *leaps*, catches hold of a low-hanging branch. With all three of them in his sight, he doesn’t need to worry about stealth so he doesn’t bother testing the branch; he swings his body up, catches another branch and starts to pull himself higher.

“Dream, just come down!” Quackity sighs, “I’m not hauling my ass up into another tree!”

“Then lose, idiot!” Dream laughs, clambering higher until he’s sticking out of the top. He looks around, trying to think of his next move as he hears Sapnap curse and start climbing after him, more lumbering and clumsy than Dream is in the higher arena. Dream still has to take a second to appreciate the view; sweeping swaths of green, healthy trees as far as the eye can see. The village is at the other end of the forest, where their game had started earlier today, and he can see the roof of the mansion in the distance, smoke rising from the chimney fed from the kitchen where Karl was, hopefully, finishing up dinner.

There’s not many options for Dream. There’s another tree but he isn’t sure he’d make the jump - he’d estimate it’s closer to fifteen feet away than ten. Quackity and George are at the base of the tree he’s in, Quackity nervously spotting Sapnap as he pulls himself into the branches; Sapnap’s finally regained most of his mass after months and months of work but it’s fresh muscle, unused to the sort of labor that Dream’s body is still intimately familiar with, like climbing. George has an arrow pulled but Dream can see it’s not dulled and he doubts George will actually loose it if Dream does something stupid, like impersonate a flying squirrel.

“Dream, don’t you dare!” George motions with his notched arrow, “You won’t make that jump!”

“Just give up!” Sapnap grunts, closing in, “We caught you!”

“Like hell you have,” Dream grins, a breeze rustling the leaves and his hair as it wafts past them, “Maybe next time!”

“Dream, don’t -”

Quackity’s words fall on deaf ears. Dream leaps from the branch, using it as a crunchy springboard, and extends his arms as far as they will go.

He hears horrified shouts from the ground, distinctly does *not* feel an arrow embed itself in his body, and manages to brush the branch he was aiming for; he doesn’t fully grab it but he’s able to use it to catch himself and slow his momentum. He knows that if he lands on his feet, his ankle will simply give out, so he allows himself to swing into a goofy-looking controlled tumble. He scrapes his palms but he lets himself roll to his feet, the pain easily pushed aside as he whoops excitedly. His heart races, his lungs contracting and expanding rapidly as he breathes, his blood pumping. He doesn’t bother looking over his shoulder, just takes off while Sapnap gives an enraged yell and an arrow finally gets loosed. It misses, as Dream knew it would, the sharp tips making George act as if Dream’s got a shield up.

“Bastard!” One of them shouts, but the breeze steals the voice away before he can place it. He just laughs, leaves and sticks crunching underfoot. He hears them bumbling behind him but this is Dream’s favored territory and he’s in his element. He’s free, he’s running, he’s got nothing holding him back. He sees the break in the trees marking home and puts on a last burst of speed, cloak rippling with him as he runs. Just for fun, he cartwheels the final step, lands in a laughing bundle on the fresh green of the lawn, starfishing out to stare up at the dark sky as the sun disappears over the horizon.

“Dream!”

“Dream, that was so fuckin’ dangerous, oh my gods!”

“*Idiot*, what if you’d missed!?”

Dream pops up on his elbows, watching the three of them fly from the trees, Quackity’s armor casting a soft purple haze over them all.

“I won.” He says smugly.

“You threw yourself out of a tree!” Sapnap grumbles. “*Two*, in fact.”

“I *won*, though.” Dream insists. “You didn’t catch me. I made it out of the forest before sunset.”

“Yeah, good job,” George rolls his eyes but Dream can see the fondness, the exhausted pleasure of a good hunt, in the line of his shoulders. “We’ll outlaw trees next time.”

“That isn’t fair.” Dream loses his smile but he accepts the hand that Quackity offers and lets himself be pulled onto his feet.

“We’re definitely outlawing throwing *mud* at us,” Quackity shoves him when he’s only just on his feet, nearly sending him back down. “You can do the laundry tonight.”

“But I won!”

“Okay, then you can do the laundry tomorrow.”

“We’ll not be here tomorrow,” George rolls his eyes and Dream quickly plasters himself to George’s side as they make their way to the front door, draping an arm over his shoulders.

“Not late enough to do laundry, at least. Maybe we can ask Mister Nook to do it.”

“I say we just put them away and Dream can scrub ‘em when we get back.” Sapnap jokes, casually swinging his and Quackity’s linked hands between them. Dream knows it’s unnecessary but he can’t help sweeping a quick gaze over Sapnap, checking to see if he’s limping, or lagging, or if he looks particularly uncomfortable. It’s been months since any of those things were true and Sapnap has been working hard for the last good while to regain what he’d lost while he was sick. It’s still new, the muscle and stamina, and he’s relearning what he could once do on instinct, but Dream has been seeing nothing but progress since Sapnap went into the upswing. Soon enough, Sapnap’s going to be back to beating him as often as he loses in their spars.

“You’re all just jealous.” Dream declares as they all duck inside to the entrance hall. There’s a pile of bags already set by the door, prepared for them to grab as they file out in the morning, but Dream is more concerned with the smell of beef that’s permeated the mansion since he was last home; it smells fucking delicious, especially after nearly a full day of running around outside. He’s tired, and hungry, and thirsty, and brimming with victorious energy and he knows that Karl will be a captive audience to every story that any of them want to tell about their day in the woods. If they’re fun enough, he may even write them down. Does it feel a little bit immature to hope that Karl will like one of his stories enough to write it down? Yes, but Dream doesn’t care. He likes knowing that, years and years from now, there will be little moments recorded for the five of them to read through together and remember.

“I’m jealous that Karl got to hang out at home all day instead of picking through the damn woods, is what I’m jealous of.” Quackity brushes past them all, headed toward the kitchen, “Karl? Karl, we’re back!”

Dream snorts, following behind him and dragging George along, too. Quackity had fun, no matter how much he denies it, and Dream knows it. Quackity is the one who cornered him at the stream in the first place, even.

“Karl?” He hears Quackity call again, “Where are you?”

“He isn’t in the kitchen?” Dream breaks away from George, who’s started mumbling to Sapnap about something, to make it to the kitchen, where it is, indeed, barren of their wayward librarian.

“No,” Quackity pops the lid off the bubbling pot on the stove and carefully stirs it with the wooden spoon left close by, “But this isn’t burnt. He’s around.”

“I’ll bet he’s in his brewing room,” George walks past Dream, headed for the sink, “Dream, go get him, please. I’m starving and I’ll eat the whole pot while you’re gone if you’re not quick.”

“You’ll share it with us, at least,” Sapnap scoffs, pulling the little pack off his back that they’d filled with various goods from the market that morning before starting their hunt, most of which was at Karl’s request.

“We’ll see,” George says just as Dream slips down the hall toward Karl’s brewing room.

Dream likes the brewing room; it always smells - magical. He can’t quite put words to what magic smells like but Dream knows it’s nice. It reminds him of Karl, now, mostly, and nights spent sitting in there with cups of tea, listening to Karl chop ingredients and mutter about recipes to himself while Dream comes down from a nightmare or just can’t sleep and wants some company. He still doesn’t know how to do any of this beyond what he’d had to learn in the Nether, a few necessary enchantments and life-saving potions, but he feels he knows Karl better and that is a net positive, in his opinion.

XD hadn’t known quite what to make of Karl. The guilt had rolled off Quackity like waves and XD hadn’t trusted him, though he’d been willing to protect him for Sapnap’s sake. Karl had been different; from his enchanted cloak to his tall tales, never giving away more than what he wanted to give away in any moment; He’d been a mystery, and one that XD had had no desire to figure out. It hadn’t affected George or Sapnap, so he hadn’t cared, until it suddenly affected them very much.

Dream cares. He’d wanted to make an effort; for Sapnap, of course, but for Quackity, and for Karl, and for himself, too. Maybe it had started out as a sort of fraught connection saved by Sapnap’s presence and some rather intense trauma, but time and attention and care had helped them to form one cohesive friendship that felt real and whole. It was good. For all that George and Sapnap are all that he *needs*, Dream has found that he *wants* Quackity and Karl. He’d wanted to be their friend, to get to know them. To garden with Quackity despite his utter lack of a green thumb, and to listen to Karl even though he doesn’t know what he’s talking about half the time. He’d wanted to know them for Sapnap, and for himself, too. And now, he does.

The basement is magic-smoky when he opens the door, knocking gently on the old wood to announce his presence. It’s well-ventilated, so Karl doesn’t asphyxiate while brewing, but enchanting always brings about a magical mist that looks and smells smokey, even if it doesn’t actually cause harm. It’s what leaves behind the tinge of magic that Karl always smells of.

“Karl? We’re back.”

Through the haze, he can just about make out Karl, hunched over a desk with a familiar cloak under his hands, notes scattered every which way and lapis staining the ends of his fingers.

“Dream!” Karl’s head pops up, his breath blowing away some of the fumes, “Come in, come in, I’m almost done! Did you win?”

“Yeah. Are you still messing with the cloak? I already told you it was perfect.”

“It is now,” Karl corrects, wiping away the lapis on a cloth already streaked with blue. He pulls the cloak from his work table and holds it up by the shoulders. “You’ll like this, I promise.”

“Alright,” Dream says, humoring him, and allowing Karl to reach up and slip the cloak around his shoulders when he draws close. He can immediately feel the difference between it and the non-enchanted cloak he’d worn during the hunt. The cloak pattern is reminiscent of Karl’s, but less...eclectic; it’s a patchwork of green and black squares, the hood made out of actual creeper skin that Karl had tanned himself. It had been a Winter’s Festival gift from Karl and, even then, it had been more than just a lovingly hand-made cloak. Karl had entwined enchantments into the embroidery, much like he had with his own cloak, but specifically for Dream.

The original magic had been simple - it increased the feeling of pressure around his shoulders. When Dream wore it, it felt almost like a hug, but without the suffocating feeling of such close, constant contact. Dream had appreciated how it helped him stay grounded, stay in his body, when his mind had a habit of wandering. Dream had loved it as it was, but Karl hadn’t been satisfied. He’s been tinkering with the enchantments ever since; blast resistance, a general wellness enchantment, even a certain level of protection against arrows and the like. If there’s a particular reason why Karl chose him to test out his enchantments on, Karl hasn’t given it, but Dream is more than happy to play guinea pig if it means he gets a cool enchanted cloak out of it.

Something feels different when Dream has the cloak settled around his shoulders compared to the last time he put it on just twelve hours before. The pressure is still there, and the gentle hum of magic. It’s not at all like XD or the throne, but entirely like Karl; focused and full of love. Despite the similarities, Dream can feel that there’s been a shift. It hangs just slightly differently, comfortable but heavy with the weight of new magic.

“What have you done to it?” Dream asks, twisting the fabric over in his fingers and letting it fall through the air. Karl’s grin just gets wider.

“Believe me, it was a tricky enchantment. It took a bit of research, and a lot of lapis lost to experiments, but I finally figured it out!”

“Yeah, but what is it? I’m not a magic nerd like you, Karl, I can’t just tell what it is by the - the scent, or whatever.”

“You don’t have to be a nerd to know what it is,” Karl says, “Wrap it tighter around you. And walk closer to the fire. You’ll feel it.”

Dream raises an eyebrow, but does as Karl suggests despite his reservations. Karl is practically bouncing, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet as he watches eagerly and that gives Dream security. Karl wouldn’t send him close to fire for no reason.

Dream feels it as he pulls the cloak tight and steps up to Karl's furnace. The heat, the built up magic-smoke in the room, the pressure of the cloak all start to get to him almost immediately. He's gotten better about it, being too warm, but he isn't *cured* by any means, and all of those things combined usually lead to him needing to leave, seek out cooler air and kinder memories.

Instead, all of it just...sort of...fades. The buildup of heat stops, and despite the cloak wrapped tight around him, he feels like a breeze has just swept through him, cooling his skin, slowing his racing heart. And it keeps going. Everytime he thinks he might get too warm, it is like the cloak itself takes a deep breath, and keeps his body at a normal temperature. Far away from the imagined heat of the Nether.

"Karl," Dream says, because he's almost entirely lost for words, "Karl, this is..."

"Told you," Karl says with a smile, "Now it's finally perfect."

"How did you even *do* this?" Dream asks, wondrous. He lets the cloak go loose and some of the heat returns but - not as much as what should. Not nearly enough to set him off. Dream is still comfortably room-temperature.

"Went digging through some old stories," Karl explains and then puts up his hands in defense as Dream turns to him with a look, "I'm serious! Same with the color. Why do you think I chose green?"

"I don't know, because George said I look good in green?"

"First of all," Karl says, starting to count on his fingers, "George would say you look good in any color, and second, George couldn't tell you what color green was on a rainbow so his opinion doesn't count."

"Okay, okay, fair enough," Dream laughs, but it's slightly forced. He can only think of one other reason why Karl might have chosen green, of all things, and it didn't exactly sit well with him.

"It's not because of... because of XD," Karl says, once again showing he's far more perceptive than Dream once gave him credit for, "Okay, maybe it started as it, a bit, but I found a better reason. A better story. Do you wanna hear it?"

Vaguely, Dream thinks of the dinner upstairs and how this was only supposed to be quick. But he nods anyway. He wants to know.

"There's an old set of deities in legend; older than Prime, if the stories are to be believed, and they're still worshiped in parts of the Greater SMP...Anyway, there's one god, called the Solar Queen."

The name sparks as familiar but Dream doesn't bother digging up old memories. He has a storyteller right in front of him, and Dream has come to prefer Karl's stories to most other ways for learning about theology.

“He’s the champion of sunlight and daytime, the first slow break of dawn and the quick wind around your ankles. He has dominion over swiftness and archery as well. I’ve been weaving sigils connected to him into that cloak ever since I found out about it. There’s one particular legend that reminded me of you. He made a tower out of solid gold, and offered it as a prize to the rest of his pantheon,” Karl winks, “If they won a competition, of course. That’s what made me think of you; the competitive streak you both share. He, out of everyone, could take your natural skill and protect you when you decide to do stupid things like jumping into a boat from fifty feet up using an ender pearl -”

“Or jumping out of a tree onto a dodgy ankle,” Dream mutters and Karl raises an eyebrow.

“Or that.” He concedes, “If there is any deity that would keep you safe from the Nether, it would be him. If anything happens, and we can’t be there...you’ve got a deity at your back.”

Dream wants to say something. Anything that would break past the lump in his throat. Instead, what breaks the silence is George shouting from the top of the stairs down to the brewing room.

“Are you coming up for dinner, or do I have to start getting jealous?!”

“Definitely start getting jealous!” Karl calls back and Dream chokes on a laugh.

“You still didn’t say why it was green, though,” Dream says, as they make their way up the stairs.

“The Solar Queen is the creator of creepers, or so the myth goes,” Karl says, “For his followers, they represent freedom. He gifted them small bursts of his light to protect themselves if they’re in danger. That reminded me of you, I guess. Freedom in the light.”

“You’re such a fucking nerd,” Dream snorts, and buries his pink cheeks in the cloak. He’s come to know them, and he’s glad that they’ve come to know him, too.

Sapnap isn’t afraid to say he’s a bit territorial. Part of it’s instinctual, just part of being a fire demon; part of it’s cultural, a lesson of the Badlands. Part of it was trained into him over the course of years at George’s side, and yet more is from months of running for his and George’s lives with half his heart gone, and then the year he’s spent healing from all of that. Wherever the bulk of his territorialism comes from, the fact remains that it is something deep in his bones. This is his home, and these are his people, and there is nothing in the world he wouldn’t do for them. He doesn’t want anyone to come close; not while he’s still in the healing process, not while they are still settling into their happiness.

His deep desire to keep this *safe* is never more clear than when the five of them are together and happy, like at dinner. The warmth of the food and their home, the gentle curl of Quackity’s hand in his, their rings clinking together; he could stay here forever. George dishes out the dinner that Karl made, and Dream pulls out some fruit he picked up during a bit of downtime in the forest, much to the hunters’ disdain and Karl’s utter delight. There is laughter as the manhunt of the day is recounted, and gentle mocking that leaves Sapnap pink in the face and breathless from his shouting, his cheeks aching from grinning. They break out

the honeyed mead and their cheeks get pinker, the air growing warmer. Sapnap looks at the people he loves and he watches how they glow in the evening and he never thinks them more beautiful than in moments like these.

They migrate slowly into the living room; Dream and Quackity argue over which disc to put in the jukebox while Sapnap just collapses onto the sofa, watching as music is finally decided on. It plays over Dream and George gently swaying and Karl twirling Quackity with a lack of decorum or practice that makes Sapnap's heart sing, the glow of the fire casting a warm orange hue over the room.

Sapnap hadn't ever really enjoyed dancing; not like George or Dream did. He found it too stiff, too rigid. It was everything he hated about mixing with stuffy aristocrats, all pomp and circumstance, just a facade of any real emotion. When he danced as a kid; on his own, or standing on his father's toes, he did it because he was happy, so happy that he could barely contain himself. Dancing at balls or in lessons, it was all about posture. All about who danced with who and how they did so, and it had sucked all the joy out of it. He had to worry about proper steps and where to put his hands and feet, and keeping to the music, and twirling, or not twirling. It had felt boring and useless as a teenager, and even more so as an adult. He knew that his best friends snuck away to dance in the hidden corners of the castle, and he would happily cover for them, he just didn't think that he would ever feel the same way about it that they did.

Watching Karl make Quackity spin, both breathless with laughter as they cling onto each other, the fire reflecting off the gold of their rings when his eyes - as they now tend to do - stray to the little bands, he thinks maybe he wouldn't mind trying dancing again.

"Stop, Karl, stop, man, I'm dizzy!"

Karl slows them both to a stop, and Quackity rests his head on Karl's shoulder, swaying dangerously.

"A little too much mead, baby?" Karl asks, in a voice that would be teasing if it wasn't so unbearably fond.

"Maybe," Quackity giggles and Sapnap might burst with love for them right then and there.

"Come sit down," Sapnap gestures to the seat next to him, "See, I've already warmed it up for you, Q."

"Such a gentleman," Quackity simpers as Karl leads him to the couch, but any joking is lost when Sapnap pulls him down to the cushion and kisses him, soft and sweet.

"Get your head back on straight," Sapnap says after the brief kiss, "I can't leave Karl without a dance partner."

"Really?!" Karl says incredulously, at the same time that Quackity, eyes closing and head tilting back against the pillow, murmurs, "Nothing about me is straight, Sap."

Sapnap rolls his eyes, and reaches for the small pitcher of water on the coffee table. He pours Quackity a glass, makes sure his hand closes around it. “Just make sure you’re hydrated.”

Quackity salutes lazily; more of a wave of his free arm vaguely in the air than a proper salute, seemingly putting all of his attention on drinking his water.

Karl grabs Sapnap’s hand, and his attention, and pulls them both towards the center of the room, where Dream and George are still box-stepping to the music, whispering to each other in their own little world. Sapnap had been a bit annoyed by it, once, how they disappeared into each other; he’d had long months to miss it, though, and he’s come to deeply appreciate being able to see it once again. Even if it’s still annoying sometimes.

“You never dance with me. A new appreciation for it? A sudden interest in the art, my love?” And maybe it’s a little bit of the alcohol in his system, but he swears Karl’s hands are leaving fireworks where they trail over his hips, even through his shirt.

“No.” Sapnap says, trying to shake himself clear of the feeling, “I’m not very good. I always skipped out on lessons. It just...dunno. Looks fun, with you.”

“He’ll step on your toes, Karl,” George says, from where his head is resting against Dream’s chest as they sway together.

“Like *you’re* one to talk, Mister Two Left Feet. I listened to Dream complain enough.” Sapnap says, and lets Dream deal with George’s indignant spluttering as he turns his attention back to Karl. Karl regards him carefully, head tilted like a small bird, before he takes Sapnap’s hands.

“It doesn’t have to be anything fancy. But I can show you how we commoners dance, if you’d like.”

“Show me,” He says, and lets himself be led under Karl’s gentle direction. It’s nothing like the more complicated dances he learnt as a teenager, the ones filled with social cues and different steps and twirls and lifts of all kinds. It’s calming, as he lets Karl move them to the soft lilt of the music. Karl leads, and Sapnap follows, and the footwork isn’t fancy, and Karl doesn’t even flinch when Sapnap inevitably treads on his toes.

“How’s your flame?” Karl asks softly, as he leads Sapnap into a less complicated version of a box-step than he’s seen Dream and George do a thousand times before, “Are you ready to leave?”

Sapnap scoffs, “My flame is *fine*, Karl. You all worry too much. A little rain on the journey won’t hurt me.”

“It’s not really the journey I’m worried about.” Karl says, frowning, “It’s the leaving.”

Sapnap furrows his eyebrows, confused. He stalls, but Karl doesn’t, and they keep dancing, slow and gentle to the soft music. Karl takes a deep breath before he elaborates, like he’s fortifying himself. He always does that, before he talks about when Sapnap was sick.

“The last time you were going to leave, it was with Skeppy and Bad, Sap. We’ve spent a long time making sure that you - that everyone feels safe here. That we’re all...healing and stuff. I don’t want to ruin it.”

“We’re leaving to make sure we *don’t* ruin it, remember?” Sapnap reminds him, “If we stayed here our whole lives, we’d hate it. It’s home, not a prison. Plus, you saw how I got when Dream told me that Tommy had the address for this place.”

“I think you’re cute when you’re territorial.” Karl giggles, but he quickly lapses back into seriousness. “You know you don’t have to protect us, Sapnap.”

“I want to. And if that means we get a holiday out of it, and I get to see Tommy get his ass handed to him by my best friend, then that’s what I’ll do. Out of everything I’ve ever done to protect you guys, this is gonna be the funniest by far. I’m *fine*.” He pauses, and considers, “Though if Tommy does ever show up here, he’ll be thrown over the property line so fast he won’t even know what happened.”

Karl chokes out a laugh, and he seemingly can’t help but smile at the mental image.

“Are *you* ready for tomorrow?” Sapnap asks after a few minutes, “When you came up for dinner, it looked like you had been down in your lab all day. Prepping?”

Karl hums, “Something like that.”

“We can delay if you want -”

“No!” Karl says, almost frantically, and Sapnap nearly misses the panic that flashes in his eyes. He holds Karl tighter. “I really do want to go. More... more than I probably should.”

“Yeah?” Sapnap doesn’t push, but he leaves it open for Karl to continue. Shows him that he’s listening. Sapnap squeezes his hands in reassurance as Karl appears to collect himself, and smiles down at Sapnap.

“I love it here,” Karl starts, “I do, I really do, but...”

“I get it,” Sapnap says, and Karl grips tight to their entwined hands.

“You do?”

“Karl, you were a mercenary -”

“Part-time!”

“You were a *part-time* mercenary. You probably traveled more in a month than I did in my whole life.” Sapnap replies, “We’ve been here for over a year now. It’s... this thing is new to all of us. But especially to you.”

“Even with my guild, I...my library was the one place I had that was permanent, you know? But I would leave it, I would leave my guild at the drop of a hat for a job. I’ve never wanted to... to stay before I met you two. And I still want to stay, Sapnap, I do -”

“You can say you want to go exploring, Karl.” Sapnap says, brushing some of Karl’s hair out of his face, hoping it will help to assure him, “You can tell us that you need the open road or what the fuck ever. We’ll be right here with you.”

“I just...” Karl steals a glance over Sapnap’s shoulder, to where Quackity is quietly dozing on the sofa, “I just don’t want any of you to think I’m abandoning you.”

“Karl...” Sapnap sighs, “Is this what’s been keeping you up at night?”

“You noticed?” Karl looks away, guilt slumping his shoulders.

“You know I’m a light sleeper.” Sapnap says by way of explanation, “I didn’t want to push you to say anything.”

“It’s not the only thing,” Karl says, quietly, “Ever since we planned this trip...before it, even, I keep having these dreams where I just... leave. I climb out of our bed and I leave without so much as a goodbye. And when I wake up, I still feel like... I can hear the road calling. Telling me to go.” Karl inhales sharply, in the way he does sometimes when he’s trying to hold back, and their dancing comes to an end. “It’s stupid, I know -”

“It’s not stupid.” Sapnap says, “Karl, it’s not stupid.”

“I keep dreaming about abandoning you, Sap,” Karl says, “And then I do abandon you, because I can’t bear to stay in our bed feeling like such a dick.”

“And then you get back in, and you *stay*,” Sapnap says, and this time he makes sure to cup Karl’s face in both of his, because Karl isn’t much of a crier but, just in case, Sapnap wants to make sure he catches the tears if they come, “Dreams are just that. Dreams. They aren’t real, and what happens in them doesn’t mean shit when you wake up. It’s what you decide to do when you’re awake that matters.”

He pulls Karl forward, pressing their foreheads together, so he can hear every hitch in Karl’s breath.

“You stay. You haven’t moved from this place in over a year, Karl. I’m surprised you haven’t lost your shit yet, if you’ve been feeling this trapped.”

Karl hiccups a laugh, and Sapnap kisses his forehead. “You stayed for us,” he finishes, “We can travel for you, darlin’.”

“Ahhh,” Karl puts a hand to his heart. “*Gods*, you know I’m weak for that. I love you,” Karl says, and he kisses Sapnap. Sapnap can taste the tiniest hint of salt, but mostly it’s warm stew and *home*.

“Love you, too,” Sapnap says, “And next time, fuckin’ say something. Please. We’ve already done the whole keeping secrets things twice now and it fucking sucked. I don’t want to repeat a year ago, so we need to tell each other if something is wrong.”

“I didn’t want to force you into traveling until you were fully recovered.” Karl ducks his head, cheeks going red. It’s a little weird, being on this side of the ‘share your feelings’ talk.

Sapnap has a hunch it is weird for Karl, too.

“So you waited until you were practically bouncing off the walls?” Sapnap says, light and teasing, “That’s a bullshit excuse and you know it.”

“I’m not *bouncing off the walls*,” Karl says, his nose scrunching up adorably, and he doesn’t look like he’s going to cry anymore so that is a win in Sapnap’s book.

“Sure,” Sapnap says, smiling, “Come on. We should have an early night tonight. Get our angel up to bed.”

Karl smiles back, and he slips out of Sapnap’s grip and heads over to Quackity, nudging his shoulder gently, “Babe? Come on, wake up a little.”

Quackity doesn’t stir much, huffing softly.

“I’ll carry him,” Sapnap says, and Karl pouts.

“But I want you to carry *me!*”

From where they have been absorbed in each other, Dream and George break apart as the music slows to a stop, both slightly flushed and giddy.

“I’ll carry you, Karl,” Dream says, which George immediately protests. Sapnap just shakes his head fondly and kneels down at Quackity’s side.

“Angel?” He says, soft. He’s pretty sure Quackity isn’t awake enough to register words, but there’s no harm in telling him anyway, “Time for bed. I’m gonna pick you up, alright?”

Quackity hums, and Sapnap only just hears it over the three-way tussle going on behind him. He takes the humming as agreement and carefully slips his arms under Quackity’s legs and then under his shoulders. He’s still retraining his muscles but this, being able to pick Quackity or Karl up off their feet, was one of his first priorities when he was able to get back to training. It’s not as easy as it was over a year ago, but Sapnap would die before he ever admits that.

Quackity huffs, turning his face into Sapnap’s shoulder, pink-cheeked and warm. They don’t indulge in alcohol often, and Sapnap still hasn’t actually seen Karl touch a drop, but their last night at home had called for something special and Sapnap loves when Quackity lets loose and enjoys himself. He’s a giggly drunk, relaxed and happy, and quick to get sleepy. Sapnap would carry him to bed every night, if that’s what Quackity wanted, or they could just...sleep out here in the living room.

But Sapnap wants to enjoy their soft bed one last time before they all leave, and he knows Quackity will thank him for it in the morning.

He leads out of the room, glancing over to check on the others and finding Karl laughing as he is slung over Dream's shoulder, George kicking up a fuss as Dream tries to wrestle him onto his other shoulder.

Sapnap would call out and warn Dream not to pull anything just before they go on a journey, but it would be kinda funny if he did, so Sapnap leaves it.

He hears them follow not far behind eventually, though, Karl still giggly and Dream wheezing and George complaining while Quackity snores quietly against Sapnap's collarbone.

When he crawls into bed with Quackity and Karl, he finds himself...excited. He'd thought sleep would elude him; his head full of worry about leaving, about what Karl had shared during their dance, about seeing people from their past again. But Quackity is peaceful, nightmare-free as he sleeps, and Karl looks happy as he settles down, draws Sapnap into sleepy kisses that Sapnap knows could easily ignite into more if either of them wanted.

They don't pursue it, though, and the heat fizzles into embers, warm and gentle in his chest, the promise of an inferno if he needs it but at rest for now.

"Good night." He says into Karl's curls, holding him close, Quackity a warm weight at his back with an arm around his waist.

"Good night, my love." Karl says back, sounding impossibly fond. Sapnap feels a hand brush along his side, and then he is asleep.

Traveling is familiar. George can't say he missed it, but he doesn't mind it, either. He's only truly traveled in two styles before; like that of a prince or like that of a criminal. It's only ever been plush carriages and knights and plenty of food, long and boring hours wasted away talking to Dream and Sapnap within the carriage after lots of begging and then loudly demanding that they be allowed to sit with him *or* no carriages and plenty of pursuing knights and little food, long and boring hours wasted away playing games with the others just to ignore his aching feet and high-grade anxiety. Or, on one memorable occasion, locked up with his dying friends in a make-shift cage, being carted to his execution.

This time, it's somewhere in-between. There is a wagon, for one, but no one chasing them. Patches snorts and huffs as she walks, Dream leading her by the reins because she was temperamental this morning and adores him most, and George and the others all splay out inside the wagon. It's otherwise empty; just them and the enderchest George had honestly thought he'd never have to see again.

If it were up to him, they'd all spend the rest of their lives in the mansion and surrounding grounds, occasionally making journeys to the village for supplies but ultimately homebound. George is a homebody; he likes being in his space, with his people, and his things, and his routine. He's fine with this venture, because he doesn't want to trap any of them for his own happiness. Besides, Karl needs supplies and some fresh air, and Dream was starting to get a little restless, too, and Wilbur wouldn't stop sending spam mail about coming to visit and Sapnap would have drawn first blood if anyone from Kinoko stepped foot on their land - but he hopes that they just...spend a week in the capital, have some fun, and come back quickly. At least he has Sapnap on his side about this.

Being away from home, back out in the open, makes George nervous. He takes first watch on the first night, if only to put off having to lay in the wagon and pretend to be resting just that little bit longer. The night is warm as summer settles in; the Badlands aren't as hot as George had always assumed they would be, but definitely warmer than Kinoko. George has taken a liking to it and he lets himself enjoy it and try to relax by the fire.

It feels, sitting alone while the others sleep, a little bit like he's been transported back to those months on the run. A fire and a camp circled with torches to ward mobs away, the distant groan of zombies. His bow sits at his side, arrows fletched and awaiting use. There's a pit in his stomach, letting him know that he isn't home. He's being pulled back out into the world, and the world is dangerous and wants to steal the people he loves away from him.

George breathes in and out, forcing his hands to unclench.

No. The world is, as a rule, ambivalent to all. Nothing is specifically out to get him or his. What happened before...it only happened because he was a prince. Because of his stupid family and the stupid throne. It wasn't because it was George, it was because of his station. He isn't a prince anymore, and never will be again. There's no reason anyone should come for the people he loves; without the pull of the throne that George had stabbed with the very sword only feet away, at Dream's side, there's nothing in particular that sets their group apart from any other. They're safe, even when not surrounded by fortified walls and miles of empty land.

This is going to be a normal trip. They're going to visit friends. They're going to have a nice time. They're going to be normal young men, doing normal stuff, and there will not be a love-eating throne or orders of knights or crazed politicians, aside from Wilbur, and he'll have his family to keep him under control.

"George?"

George jumps, head whipping to the side to find the voice calling to him. Karl blinks back, blue irises flashing silver in the firelight. He looks tired, shadows of the night casting dark circles under his eyes, exhaustion tugging the corners of his lips down until he sees he has George's attention. He smiles, then, and George smiles back on reflex; a natural response to Karl.

"You're supposed to be sleeping." George checks the placement of the moon, "For a few hours yet, at least."

"Can't." Karl shrugs, climbing completely out of the wagon and dropping to the ground with a light thump. "Jittery."

"You, too?" George doesn't mean to ask, but the words are out before he can stop them.

"Yeah," Karl joins him by the fire, plopping down next to him, leaving only a few inches of space between them. The heat of the fire is nice, but the heat of a friend is better and George feels his tense shoulders smoothing out with the company. "It's weird being away from home. Like, actually away."

George hums in agreement.

“Still,” Karl sighs, tilting his head back to look at the stars “It’s good, too. I missed being under the open sky like this. It was starting to feel like the wind was gonna forget my name.”

“Would that be a bad thing?” George looks at the dirt under his feet, slowly working the toe of his boot in a circle, “If the world just forgot about us?”

“Maybe not.” Karl leans against him, “But, man, it’d be kinda boring. The world can forget about us, but I don’t wanna forget about the world.”

“I’ve had enough adventures.” George admits. “I mean, I don’t wanna bring you down, I just...”

“You like being home.”

“It feels like we’re tempting fate.” George pokes at the fire. “You know?”

“Yeah.” Karl tilts his head, laying it on George’s shoulder. “Do you want to go home? We can turn around.”

“No, we can’t.” George laughs, soft so he doesn’t wake the others, and jostles Karl lightly. “Stop being so self-sacrificial, you’re starting to sound like Dream. You guys needed to get out. Just let me be irrational.”

“I want you to be happy, too,” Karl drops his voice, soft. “I don’t want my issues to cause you stress, George. You deserve your calm epilogue.”

“I thought real life didn’t have epilogues.”

“Maybe we’ll be the first story real life’s ever told.” Karl sits up to look at him. “Really, George. I’m sorry I didn’t check in with you. I saw Sapnap’s worries coming, but I didn’t think about you.”

“Ugh, shut up,” George reaches out and bonks his palm to Karl’s forehead lightly, and then pushes his head down playfully, “Stop sounding like that. Prime, we’re just going to Pandora. Stop trying to divine the ideal wedding date for me and Dream and find me a good seat for when you and Sapnap bat Wilbur back and forth like a sad little cat toy and I’ll forgive you for dragging me out of my cave.”

Karl laughs, which was the goal, and smacks George’s hands away. “We are not going to treat the esteemed Councilmen Soot like a cat toy, George.”

“A dog toy, then?”

“No.”

“Boo,” George frowns. “I wanted to see you punch him. The story’s nice, but I want a visual. What about the divination? We need to compromise here.”

Karl giggles, leaning into him again. George likes this Karl much more than he liked the somber one from before. Maybe George isn't thrilled about having to leave the mansion, but he's happy that Karl and Dream, at least, have the chance to spread their wings, and he thinks that Quackity will enjoy seeing other people, too. He and Sapnap will just be quietly bitter and bad-tempered together for the next week, though George is sure they'll get pulled into the fun and forget about why they're so pissy for at least a bit of it. All in all, it's worth it.

"No, I won't stop." Karl declares. "Not even for this. Fuck Pandora. I'd go home right now if you said you and Dream would just tie the knot when we got there."

"We're not."

"Just *do* it," Karl rocks against him, whining, "A summer wedding would be so good for you two. I'll officiate, even, and we can do it in the orchard, Dream can climb a tree in your honor _"

"You're more obsessed with *our* nuptials than your own!"

"Because I can't *have* my own until you have yours! Whatever you put in the honor soup you fed your stupid knights, it's goin' fucking strong. I'm going to be a fiance for the rest of my life if I leave it up to you two."

"That's what you get for seducing the youngest," George can't help but tease, smiling at Karl's dramatics.

"Well, the *oldest* have been betrothed since they were practically children, so I think their engagement period has lasted long enough, that's all I'm gonna say." Karl sniffs, and then adds under his breath, "Get fucking married, you troll."

That makes George actually cackle and he slaps a hand over his mouth so he doesn't wake the others. Karl joins him in his mirth, though George is sure there's a very big kernel of truth in Karl's badgering. Sapnap is set on not getting married until Dream and George do, but George isn't going to be pressured into a ceremony by his weirdly traditional best friend *or* that friend's wedding-crazed fiance. Still, he doesn't mind the teasing, and Karl hasn't quite reached the edge of his patience just yet, so the jokes are light-hearted.

Their laughter eventually subsides, still occasionally giggling in the way that lack of sleep tends to facilitate. Even that, too, goes away, though, as the night stretches on. Eventually, George thinks Karl falls asleep like that, leaning against him with his face tilted down toward the fire, because he stops trying to fill the silence and his breathing evens out, deep and steady. He lets his head rest on Karl's, breathing in the soft scent of magic under the less-ideal smell of traveling. He can't sleep - he's still on watch - but Karl's presence at least helps him relax.

It's only because they're so close that he feels it when Karl's nightmare begins. It starts with a hitch in his breathing, subtle and only noticeable because George is so intimately familiar with the sound of Karl sleeping, but quickly moves into a full-body shiver that nearly knocks Karl over from his seated position.

“Karl?” George reaches up to carefully take his shoulder, shaking gently, “Karl, wake up.”

Karl doesn’t respond, just ducking his head down. George shakes him a little harder.

“Karl,” He repeats, a bit louder, “It’s me. I’m here, come on. Wakey-wakey.”

Karl wakes up from that, at least - bolting straight up so suddenly that he nearly knocks George in the chin with his head. George flinches back, though he’d expected the movement; his bow falls and George scrambles to catch it before it lands in the fire, only barely managing to snatch it from the flames before they lick the wood.

“*Fuck*,” He hisses, setting the bow aside to look back at Karl, “Are you o -”

He stops, blinking stupidly. Karl stares back, the moonlight casting silver across his eyes, turning them nearly milky. Karl blinks slowly, no spark of emotion or recognition behind the paleness.

“Karl?” George says slowly. “Are you awake?”

Karl blinks again, lips pulling down into a frown.

“Karl.” George repeats. “You’re scaring me. Answer me.”

Karl frowns harder, brow creasing. He turns his face to the fire, taking a deep, shuddering breath, and squeezes his eyes closed for a few seconds. When he opens them again, they’re back to being painted silver by the fire, and his skin darkens under the heat.

“Karl?”

“Hm?” Karl hums, blinking rapidly, turning to look at him, “Huh?”

“You were having a nightmare.”

“I was?” Karl wrinkles his nose, squeezing his eyes shut again, “Oh. I guess so.”

“Why don’t you head back to the others?” George suggests gently, “Get some rest.”

“Okay.” Karl agrees easily, and stands up. George watches him, worried, as he makes his way back to the wagon and climbs in. The wood creaks under him, no doubt waking all three of the people still inside, but no one complains as Karl is accepted back into the fold.

George turns back to the fire, shaking off the weird feeling trying to lay across his shoulders. It’s just first night jitters, exactly as they’d both said when Karl had joined him in the first place.

George keeps telling himself that the following night, when his internal clock wakes him for the second watch and he finds Karl, who’d taken first, staring into the fire, eyes distant and thoughtless until George touches his shoulder and jolts him into that same hazy awareness.

Karl sleeps through their third night, though, and the fourth. George is able to set aside the weird worry he's been harboring. Karl is normal during the day, if a little tired, but -

There's something about the way he'd looked after his nightmare, and when George had found him looking into the fire. Something that sets George's teeth on edge, rings familiar in a way he doesn't recognize. Like he should know it, but he doesn't.

The fifth night, Karl joins him for watch again and they squabble as normal, bicker quietly to pass the time until Karl falls asleep. That first night repeats itself, the shuddering nightmare and empty stare, the easy send off back to the wagon.

George can't place it, but something isn't right. Not necessarily *wrong*, but...not right, for sure.

As George always does when something isn't *right*, he follows his instincts. He goes to Dream.

The morning of their sixth day of travel, he finds Dream where he usually is, holding the reins while Patches snuffles and snorts herself into a state willing to pull the wagon.

Dream sits, a breeze moving his clothes and the morning sun beating down and turning his hair into golden flax in the light.

"Are we there yet?" George quips as he climbs onto the seat with him, and Dream sighs, bringing out all the theatrics.

"You know the route as well as I do, George. We'll be in the city by sundown, tomorrow."

"And there'll be a proper bed?"

"Yes, there will be a bed. Sized for two, even. The others are out of luck, though."

"Good," George says, crossing his arms and leaning into Dream's side. "I'm tired of dirt under the covers and pebbles all over the wood. You idiots are wearing *shoes* in the *wagon*."

"Oh, are the accommodations not up to par, Your Highness?" Dream asks, his voice *annoying*, "Have the dirt and pebbles offended you? Just say the word, my prince, and I'll cast them aside for making my liege uncomfortable."

"Shut up, *Karl*," George says, listening to Dream wheeze, partially in laughter and partially because George just elbowed him in the side.

"You're awfully grumpy for someone who doesn't actually care about where he sleeps as long as he gets to do it." Dream points out, when he recovers his breath.

"Maybe I'm just sick of cuddling up with the lovebirds all night." George mutters after a moment of intense listening for placement. He can hear that the others have all removed themselves from the wagon and Sapnap is calling out stretches, his favorite way to bully his fiances in the morning.

“We’ve done it before. At *home* even, when we had a million beds to choose from.” Dream shrugs, “It’s not a big deal. Or is it?”

George suddenly finds himself under Dream’s scrutiny, which is intense at best and downright intimidating at worst. George barely lasts a few seconds, and completely breaks when Dream puts Patches’ reins down and takes one of George’s hands in his.

“Has something changed?” He asks, “George? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s *wrong*, per se.” George says, but it already sounds like a lie, even though he’s ninety percent sure it isn’t, “It’s just...whatever. All in my head, probably. But -” he trails off.

“But...?” Dream presses.

“I think Karl’s been having nightmares,” George says, and then corrects. “I *know* he’s been having nightmares. I’m not sure how long he’s been having them, but the first night we were away from home, I saw one, and when he woke up, it was like he *hadn’t* woken up, right? It was like he didn’t...recognize me, or have any - any thoughts, or...he was just blank. And then the next night, I woke up and he was supposed to be keeping watch but he was just...sitting by the fire. Staring. And when I tried to snap him out of it - I don’t know if it was the fire or if I was still tired or maybe it was just because it was so fucking early, but - but. I don’t know. I don’t know.”

He feels ridiculous as he lays it out - because it just fucking sounds like Karl was having a nightmare and George is weirded out that he was out of it afterward. It sounds like Karl’s just having trouble sleeping and he nodded off on watch and George is reading into it too much but it feels like *more* than that to George, even if he can’t explain it right.

“George,” Dream says, firm and somehow so comforting all at the same time.

George glances around nervously.

“He looks at me, and it’s like there’s nothing in his eyes.” George says, in a breathless rush, “But then he blinks and it’s just Karl, and he looks tired but like himself and it’s...” He stops, and deliberately releases the tension in his shoulders. “It’s just Karl. And I can’t help but feel stupid, you know? For even thinking that there’s something wrong. It’s Karl. If there’s something wrong, he’d tell us.”

“You’re not stupid,” Dream says decisively, “You’re spoiled and stubborn and you like to drive me crazy, but you’re not stupid. If this has been worrying you, then it’s worrying me too, okay?” He lifts George’s hand, careful, the lightest kiss brushed over his knuckles.

“Is it because of Sapnap?” Dream asks, and George exhales slowly in confused relief. Dream knows. He always knows. George doesn’t even have to say why, he just *knows*.

XD wouldn’t have known. Not the same way that Dream does. George doesn’t linger on it. He’s trying not to feel guilty about missing XD while he has Dream right here in front of him, but he’s also trying not to feel guilty about how deeply he loves Dream in ways that he

hadn't loved XD. Those long weeks - years, for Dream - without each other had changed their relationship, but in no way had it made it weaker and George is ever grateful for that.

George nods, presses his forehead into Dream's shoulder. He's seeking comfort and that's kind of humiliating, but...

He knows this shouldn't upset him as much as it does, but it *does*.

Suddenly, he's thinking about Sapnap, and the footsteps on the stairs that George had ignored and the blank way he'd looked at them back then that George hadn't called out, and how his skin had been cold, colder than George, the way George had been sweaty and close to passing out from heat exhaustion but he couldn't leave, not until Sapnap was *safe* -

"George," Dream says, from somewhere above him, "George, look at me."

It takes an eon, or feels like it, as the cart shifts beneath them with the gentle morning wind, soft laughter echoing from behind them. But George opens his eyes, and Dream is waiting for him.

"There. I promise you that it's not going to end up like Sapnap."

"You can't know that -"

"I do." Dream says, with the kind of self-assurance he normally only reserves for manhunts or for the court. "For a start, Karl is a lot better at the communication thing. Not perfect, I'll give you that, but if something is bothering him, he *will* let them know. He'll tell them, and then he'll tell us. Karl wouldn't let it get as bad as Sapnap did. And if he doesn't, then he won't be upset by some gentle interrogation. He's *Karl*."

George nods, because Dream is making a lot of sense, and because it *is* Karl. He doesn't have Sapnap's self-sacrificial drive, and he doesn't have Quackity's history of bottling things up, or Dream or George's habit of just repressing everything. It's just...nightmares, and as much as they're close friends, George isn't privy to everything that the others talk about. It's just nightmares and it's entirely possible that Sapnap and Quackity know about them and just haven't brought them up to George or Dream because why the fuck would they talk to *them* about Karl's nightmares?

"And finally, Karl's about as human as they come. We don't have to worry about any inner flames going out." He squeezes George's hand, tight, "Karl *isn't* Sapnap. Chances are, he needs this holiday just as much as the rest of us. Maybe that's why he was so ready to take it."

"Alright," George says softly, then clears his throat, "I guess I just got caught up in my own head."

"I don't blame you," Dream says, pressing a kiss to his forehead, "It's a very pretty head. Easy to get lost in."

"Shut up," George says, and he doesn't mean it at all. "Just...I'm worried."

“How about I take the first watch tonight?” Dream offers. It’s a nice offer; Dream tends to prefer the last watch, so he can watch the sunrise. It makes George feel both nice and guilty - nice, that Dream would give that up just for George’s worry, and guilty, that he would give that up just for George’s worry.

But George *is* worried, and there’s no one else he trusts more than Dream, so he nods.

“That would be...” he exhales. “Comforting.”

“Then I’ll do it.” Dream nods firmly. “I’ll keep an eye on him. Let’s not jump to the worst conclusions just yet though, okay?”

“If you see it, and you don’t think something’s up, then I’m good.” George grips Dream’s wrist. “I just need some external confirmation here. Or external de-confirmation.”

“For what?” Quackity asks, making both of them jump.

“*Gods*, you asshole!” George shrieks, turning around to glare, “*Quackity!*”

Quackity cackles, leaning away from George’s flailing smacks, “What? Pay attention, assholes, there are three other people on this trip!”

“Not for long if you do that again,” Dream puts a hand to his heart, but he’s starting to grin and George knows that means Quackity will live another day, the fucking softie.

The topic is left behind in favor of happier ones, but George doesn’t forget it.

George seeks Dream out in the morning, but they don’t get a chance to *talk* until nearly sunset; Sapnap is already awake when George picks his way past Quackity and Karl and he and Dream are putting their heads together to plan the best route to actually enter the city.

George thinks about bringing it up with Sapnap, but he wants Dream to give him his thoughts before he worries Sapnap. Like him, Sapnap is already stressed about being away from home. The last thing he needs is George making him paranoid about *nightmares* if he doesn’t need to be.

And, to be fair, the worry doesn’t take a backburner to Pandora but, rather, the city comes into view only a few hours into the start of their day and...

George knows that he wasn’t exactly the most dedicated of learners. All geopolitical knowledge that he had gained during his time as prince had been out of obligation, not enthusiasm. Dream had spent time bouncing from obscure topic to obscure topic, and Sapnap preferred to help George sneak out of their shared lessons to play or wander around, and George hadn’t been shy about which of those he’d preferred doing.

The one time he had pursued literary knowledge for his own sake - not just to try and find a way out of his kingship and the curse of his family line - had been for Sapnap.

He had been newly eighteen and he'd barely convinced his mother that the other two were old enough to come along despite their lack of experience. George had never left the capital of Kinoko, and yet, there he was, tasked with renewing positive relationships with Pandora's council, his purpose obfuscated by his coming of age and the only friendly faces being his knights and Bad. His mother had thought it would be good practice. He'd put up a token amount of resistance, but he dropped it the moment he saw the longing in Sapnap's eyes.

That night, he and Dream had spent the hours between dusk and dawn reading and rereading the histories of the Badlands; the policies, the structures, the harsh, unforgiving landscape that surrounded the capital city. They had scribbled down what they remembered from Sapnap's stories, or Bad's lessons. Sapnap had found them at ten the next morning in a pile of books in the corner of the library, after the whole castle was turned upside down to look for the missing pair. George never forgot the way his anger softened as he caught a glimpse of the books they had been reading, or the notes they had painted each other's skin with.

In the end, that had been worth not really seeing the country at all. They had traveled in a carriage so heavily warded against possible dangers that they couldn't even look out the windows until they reached their destination. It had been creeping into winter, and the bad weather meant that they almost exclusively used the underground network to travel around Pandora. They'd been heavily guarded and the inclement weather had ensured that they didn't even get a chance to sneak off, though George had seen Sapnap itching for it.

George hadn't even got a moment to look at the famous black obsidian cliffs that surrounded Pandora; the three of them spent dawn to dusk politicking, much to each of their displeasure, and the evenings were spent recovering from the sharp tongues and even more pointed looks from the council. None of them were as nice as Bad was and George can only imagine that *that* hasn't changed, even as his own rank and political power has.

This part of the journey, at least, has George's excitement. He's wanted a chance to be just a simple tourist as Sapnap shows them around his homeland since his only visit to Pandora, but he can't help but be slightly apprehensive at the thought of his previous experience.

The moment they reach the peak of one of the hills outside Pandora, the easy summer day giving them a clear view, George knows it's going to be entirely different from that first visit. Even more, he knows it is going to be so much more beautiful than those old dusty books had promised him.

From both a geographical and a patriotic standpoint, Pandora is the beating heart of the Badlands. It stands on top of, and within, the peak of jagged cliffs, and it sprawls all the way into the valley, to the only break in those obsidian walls that protects the Badlands from the sea. It is the only place where the rivers meet the sea, the only place where saltwater is allowed to flow unimpeded into the soil of the Badlands. With the obsidian cliffs consistent wherever the sea met the continent, and the single overland entry into the country being through the only road in the Crimson Forest, it means that the Badlands have always been an insular country, wary and distrustful of those that made the, frankly rather foolish, attempt to enter through any other route than those two weak points.

The people of the Badlands are as hardy as the land itself, and much of the city buried deep within the obsidian is built on top of that fact. The ragged, reaching shards from the obsidian

stir up storms that rock the ocean, and to live in Pandora is often to know the sea as well as any sailor. Only the most experienced captains make the journey through the Skeleton Estuary, the only route that allows passage to Pandora. The bones of those less knowledgeable litter the waterway, extending to claim their still-living fellows, tangled up in the razored rocks, worn to a deadly sharpness by the salty sea. The bright quartz, the most readily available building material that isn't obsidian, reflects both the sea and the sky, burning straight into George's retinas.

Even in the middle of the morning, Pandora looks like a sunrise.

"It's beautiful, Sapnap," George says from where he's standing by the wagon, and Sapnap beams at him from where he's holding the reins. He can practically feel the excitement zipping beneath Sapnap's skin even though both of his hands are currently occupied by Quackity, snoring gently at his shoulder and Karl, his knee bouncing as he squeezes Sapnap's hand tight.

"Come on, sleepy head," Sapnap murmurs into Quackity's hair, and Karl reaches out a palm to cup the sleeping avian's cheek. George decides to leave before they start to whisper any more sweet nothings to wake Quackity up.

Still, he aims a gentle smack to Quackity's shins, and sticks his tongue out as Quackity startles awake and shoots a still-sleepy pout his way.

He finds Dream a ways from their little group, standing on a rocky outcrop to get a better view of the city.

"Enjoying the sight?" He calls up and Dream looks over his shoulder. Outlined by the brightness of Pandora, beloved by the sunlight as he always is, Dream is a sight more breathtaking to George than any city.

Dream smiles and George smiles back without thought. He reaches a hand up, not sure if he should join Dream or Dream should join him. He leaves it for Dream to decide and ends up with his arms full of excited, blond energy.

"Almost there. Ready for a real bed?" Dream asks, eyes on George's face with his usual wild intensity. George has learned to buffer it over the years, but it is no easy task and not something those weaker of will could stand to weather as well as he does.

"So ready." George complains, collapsing into Dream and making him take most of his weight, "It's killing me, this rough riding."

"So sorry," Dream takes his weight without complaint, "It'll be over by sunset."

"Finally, a night back in civilization." George stands up straight, glancing over to the wagon to find that Dumb, Dumber, and Dumbest have finally shaken each other awake and are pointing toward the city, Quackity and Karl watching Sapnap fondly as he talks.

It's a soft sight, and one he takes a mental snapshot of to remember. But his worry for Karl churns his stomach, makes itself known.

"How was the watch?" He asks.

Dream leans his chin on George's head, pressing against his back and letting his arms loop around George's waist. They rock together, almost like a dance, as they talk.

"I'm worried." Dream admits, and George breathes out a slow, pained breath.

"So it is like Sapnap."

"I don't think so." Dream tilts his face so his cheek presses into George's crown. When he talks, his breath moves strands of his hair. "But I saw his eyes. He was...it wasn't...him, almost."

"Like he isn't there."

"Like he's someone else."

"Great." George tightens his grip on Dream's forearms. "When do we bring it up?"

"After we meet with Tommy and his stooges." Dream decides. "Let's get this trip out of the way, and then...then we can bring it up. Sound like a plan?"

"I trust you." George shrugs. "If you think it will hold..."

Dream doesn't say anything, but he presses his lips in a firm kiss to George's temple and then unwraps himself from around him and grabs his hand to lace their fingers together.

"Come on, George," Dream says, excitement creeping into his voice, turning him into a silly teenager again, "We have a city to explore."

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Hello! Thank you all so much for the response to the first chapter, it means so much to both of us that you're enjoying it as much as we enjoyed writing it!

Of course, as alwaa huge shoutout to our beta, Jess, who makes everything we do even better than we could have ever imagine!

Speaking of better than we could have ever imagined, Nat from our server did this [INCREDIBLE ANIMATIC](#) which, i have never cried while writing this fic, but I cried watching this. It's incredible, go watch it!

Also from our server, and I had it on repeat while writing the last few chapter of this fic was [this, made by the amazing Rylls](#)

Anyway, speaking of crying, this is my second faviroute ending to a chapter in the entire fic - Have fun!

George, thankfully, does sleep in a bed that night, after they get through the checkpoint with no problems.

He'd been exhausted by the time they reached their new quarters, but overall pleased with the arrangements. It was a nice two-bedroom apartment toward the more political sector of town but far enough away to not feel stuffy. The place had been Bad and Skeppy's apartment - Sapnap's early-early childhood home - before they moved into the official ambassador quarters, and unlike the holiday home, hadn't had anyone looking after it since their departure. After flinging all the windows open to air the rooms out overnight, they had curled up in the main bedroom and fallen asleep in various states of undress. George had flopped onto the bed the moment they'd decided to sleep in the same room, Quackity next to him, and simply fell asleep without another thought.

When George wakes the next morning, Quackity is snoring at his side and the camping beds have been broken out for the others. Karl and Sapnap look cozily tucked up under Karl's cloak while Dream sleeps in the other bed, a blanket around his waist but his chest bare.

George and Quackity are both draped in yellow, Dream's newly finished cloak having found a home over them as they slept.

George is not used to being the first awake amongst them; Sapnap and Dream both tend to rise with the sun most of the time, but the travelling must have exhausted them more than either had been willing to admit because neither of them even stir as George crawls out of bed. And maybe being plastered to Sapnap's chest again is all Karl needed because he

doesn't move at all except for his breathing as George sneaks out of the bedroom and closes the door behind him.

The morning air is chilled from the ocean breeze and George shivers as he makes his way to the kitchen to figure out what to make for breakfast. He finds tins of tea and coffee, at least, and though he isn't particularly fond of it, makes himself a cup of tea and goes to explore the rest of the apartment on his own. He finds the other bedroom, a small office, an additional bathroom to the one connected to the bedroom they'd all slept in, a nicely sized living room, and a dining room just off the kitchen. There are lines etched into the doorway between the kitchen and dining room and George knows exactly what they are without needing to even guess. They barely come up to his knees. The idea that Sapnap had been so small once is an astounding one, though George knows it's only because he has built Sapnap so tall in his own head, despite all of his teasing and the scant inches George has on him in height.

He briefly mourns the knowledge that there are no pictures of Sapnap when he was a baby, nor of Dream, and then briefly mourns that there are so many of him, printed in old Kinoko news letters and books scattered throughout the current affairs and history sections of libraries and private homes. He moves on to sifting through the cupboards, finding fine dishes, though they're covered in thick dust, and a whole rack of cooking spices that make him cringe. Sapnap has always liked spicy food but he can't imagine a *baby* Sapnap eating these. He goes through all the drawers he finds, too, just because he's nosy and bored, and it's while he is casually picking through a set of crystal tumblers he finds stashed away in the dining room that he hears a knock at the front door.

There is, thankfully, a peephole, when he's picked his way to the front door. He peers through and sees the blurred outline of something set on the ground within the otherwise empty hall.

George contemplates waking one of the others up before he unlocks the door, but the idea of waking any of them after their journey doesn't sit well with him. Instead, he just hunts down the enderchest in the bedroom, quietly opening the top and rummaging around until he finds a spare dagger.

Dagger in hand, he returns to the front door and cautiously unlatches it, pulling the handle and peeking around the edge to listen. He doesn't hear anything - no breathing, no shifting of clothes. Just the distant morning sounds of a city waking up, calls from the streets below reaching through the open windows.

He opens the door completely and finds a...basket?

George blinks, the dagger falling limp in his grip as he stares. It's a nice basket, full of baked goods and a crisp, white envelope affixed to the handle. *Dream and Co.* is written on the envelope in sloping, messy lettering.

Not sure what else to do, George picks up the basket, closes and locks the door, and takes it to the kitchen.

Being part of said *and Co.*, George doesn't feel too weird about taking the envelope and breaking the seal. He skims the contents of the letter and finds himself smiling. In Tommy's very distinct way, he both welcomes them to the city and admonishes them for taking so long

when he's been *waiting*, and gives directions to a fighting arena in the western part of the city, toward the docks.

In a short post-script, a new handwriting takes over and it's one that George, unfortunately, recognizes. Wilbur, letters neat and thin, welcoming them much more politely, offering them the basket as a token, wishing them well.

George wrinkles his nose up and tosses the letter to the counter. He's sick of Wilbur's handwriting, honestly. If he never has to open another letter from that man in his life, it'll be too soon.

Still, distaste for the man aside, George is hungry and the basket means he doesn't have to leave the apartment to get food. He's halfway through a chocolate muffin smeared with cream cheese (he made use of the dagger) when Quackity stumbles out of the room, still rubbing his eyes and hair a mess.

"Mornin'." George mumbles, without bothering to swallow.

Quackity just hums, course correcting his blind stumbling so he's heading towards George. He doesn't stop until they bump into each other but George, long used to Quackity's habit of finding the nearest heat source upon waking up, lets himself be used as a buffer between Quackity and the counter.

"There's food," he says when Quackity has made himself comfortable on the stool next to him. There's a few feathers nearly perpendicular with the rest of them but George thinks it's funny so he doesn't point it out. Karl or Sapnap will fix it, if Quackity doesn't get to it himself.

"You wen' out?" Quackity asks, finally blinking awake properly, "You were alone."

"I didn't," George motions to the letter, "It's a gift from your bygone lover."

"Who?" Quackity takes a second to make the connection and then George gets the best view of his entire face screwing up, "Stop eating it, what the fuck? Why are you eating something Wilbur sent? It's probably poison."

"He wouldn't poison us before Tommy gets his ass beat by Dream," George points out, "Besides, it's good."

"Oh, is that all it takes to get you to finally acknowledge something he sent? He just had to send a basket with it?"

"Well, it would have been nice. Something to sweeten the bitterness of him begging for my seal of approval on his little government roleplay. He has good taste, at least."

"Prime," Quackity rolls his eyes, but his lips are twitching and he carefully selects a small pastry, "I'll give him that. He knows good food."

"Let's wait until the others are eating before we tell them who sent it," George whispers conspiratorially and it makes Quackity laugh, nodding before George even finishes his

sentence.

That's one thing George appreciates about Big Q; he's never one to shy away from a good prank.

And it's worth it, when the other three are finally awake. Dream and Sapnap both look like they want to question the appearance of a whole baked goods basket but Dream reads the letter and shrugs. George had figured Dream's indifferent attitude towards the letter would have appeased Sapnap, but Sapnap still snags it when Dream sets it back down to look it over himself.

It was enough for Karl, at least, who is already mid-way through a muffin when Sapnap wrinkles up his nose.

"He's such a bootlicker." Sapnap sets the letter down and picks through the basket, "What, like he's gonna steal our fiancé with some baked goods?"

"Just enjoy them," Quackity takes a small lemon cake from the depleting pile and casually waves it in Sapnap's face until he takes it, "If Wilbur wants to spend his money on feeding us, let him. I don't care and neither should you."

"Wilbur?" Karl pauses mid-bite, "Did he send the basket?"

"Him and Tommy," Dream nods, curiously pulling everything out of the basket to lay it on the counter for viewing. There's half a loaf of sweetbread left, a few muffins, four fluffy biscuits, and a slice of lemon cake; George eyes the lemon cake but allows it when Dream picks it up for himself. That's true love, in George's opinion.

"I was wondering what that taste was," Karl sighs, setting the muffin down.

"What taste?" George prompts, knowing that whatever the answer is going to be will make him laugh.

"Politics." Karl says wistfully. "These muffins are *tainted* with political desires."

"Not just *political* desires," Sapnap whispers, winking at Quackity, and Quackity goes pink as Dream chokes on his cake and George cackles.

"*Sapnap!*"

"Who said that?" Sapnap looks over his shoulder dramatically, "I'm being framed."

"*Stop*," Quackity says firmly, though it sounds more like a whine than a demand, "Can we please drop the jokes about Wilbur now?"

"Do we have to?" George pops the last of his sweetbread into his mouth to hide his grin.

"Yes." Quackity glares, "Especially *around* him or his family. He's a dick and everything, but I don't want them to start teasing him about it."

“Okay, okay,” Sapnap puts his hands up, “No more jokes. We’ll stop.”

Quackity turns to Karl, who they all know is the main perpetrator of the ongoing joke. George thinks there’s a deeper, seething resentment that spurs Karl into mocking Wilbur every chance he gets, but George keeps that firmly to himself. Karl’s always clever about making his petty nature known and if the jokes are gone, he’ll come up with some other way to let the world know about his distaste for Wilbur Soot and it will be to George’s amusement in any case.

“*Fine*,” Karl sighs, wilting under Quackity’s stare, “I won’t rub it in his stupid, smarmy face that he’s a total loser with no life.”

“Thank you.” Quackity accepts that very low bar and looks at Dream, who’s nibbling thoughtfully on his lemon cake, “When do we leave for the arena?”

“Hmm,” Dream thinks, “Let’s give it an hour?”

“Perfect,” Karl hops up, leaving his half-eaten muffin on the counter, “Just enough time to take a bath. They’ve got good pipes in this building, it’s so fancy. Come on, baby, I’ll straighten your wings out for you, if you want.”

“Oh, is that what you’ll do?” Quackity rolls his eyes but accepts Karl’s hand and gets tugged up and back toward the bedroom.

“No funny business,” Sapnap calls after them, though he doesn’t sound nearly firm enough for it to actually stop either of them if they decide to get up to something anyway.

The three of them sit around the counter for a few moments, quiet except for the sounds of the city outside.

“So this is it.” Dream says, looking around, “Your first home.”

“Yeah.” Sapnap drops his eyes, not quite shy but getting as close to it as Sapnap ever gets. “I remember it. Not much, I was pretty young, but...yeah. This is it.”

“We finally get to see it.” George props his elbows on the counter and rests his chin in his palm. “I can’t believe we’re actually here.”

“Me, either.” Sapnap admits. “It’s weird. It should feel like coming home, shouldn’t it? But it doesn’t. It’s beautiful, and I’m glad we’re back here so I can show you guys, but...I thought I’d feel different. Returned, or some shit.”

Dream slings an arm over Sapnap’s shoulder, squeezing him to his side in a quick hug, “Give it some time. It’s been, what? Fifteen years? You’ll find the connection you’re looking for.”

“Maybe.” Sapnap says, but he sounds dubious.

George knows what the problem is. He feels it, too. Sapnap wants to go home - *their* home. The mansion, where it’s safe and things are familiar and there are no threats. George worries,

just a little, if they've pushed too hard too early. If they should have waited longer before pulling Sapnap back out into the world.

Ah, well. Even if they have, it's too late to take it back now.

"Hey," George taps the table and it catches both of their attention, as always. Sometimes, it seems like the smaller the movement, the more intensely they both pay attention to it. Sapnap flicks his eyes from George's tapping hand to his face, dark eyes curious. "Whatever you're looking for, the four of us are going to be here with you, whether you find it or not."

Sapnap's eyes soften, lips curving into a smile.

"You're such a softie," he reaches out and George doesn't duck away fast enough to avoid getting his hair ruffled.

"Hey!"

"Idiot," Sapnap clears his throat, straightening back up, "*I know* that."

"Well, good," George ruffles his hair and then flattens it with his hands, sniffing, "Go interrupt your silly little fiances before they start something they won't have time to finish. They're only ever this quiet when they're up to something."

Sapnap goes pink in the cheeks, eyes cutting to the bedroom door, "They wouldn't."

"Wouldn't they?" Dream asks, amusement obvious in his tone.

"Gods damn it." Sapnap mutters and breaks away from Dream's side, striding toward the bedroom with purpose.

George watches him go, trying to stifle his giggles. "Those three..."

"It would be cute if it weren't so annoying," Dream says, going back to casually looking over their baked selection.

"Like you can talk." George scoffs, "You're the king of annoying."

"If I'm the king, then you're the *god* of annoying."

"If I'm the god, then you're the *creator* of annoying."

"If I'm the creator -" Dream cuts himself off, crossing his arms haughtily, "I'm not being drawn into this game with you, George. I have a duel to get ready for."

"Oh?" George blinks innocently, "Is that so? Go on, then," He motions, "Go get ready for your duel, Dream. I'll just sit here and enjoy the only alone time I'm liable to get for the rest of the week."

Dream's face goes blank and then conflicted, eyes cutting to the bedroom door. "That isn't fair."

“Oh?” George smirks. “Come tell me how unfair it is.”

Dream, as always, is too weak to say no to him and comes around the counter. George is all too happy to accept him into his arms and press morning-soft kisses to his jaw, laughing into the ticklish touches when Dream drags his cheek down his neck and the stubble of his morning beard catches at his skin.

If they end up getting caught necking by the others in a few minutes, George won't mind all too much. It's a good morning and he has high hopes for the rest of the day to follow, if this is how it starts.

They find the arena easily enough, though it takes some asking around. Karl comes in handy, always willing to talk to a new face and prepared to chat up strangers for information for any reason, apparently.

It's a nice place; more of a fighting pit than an arena but the Badlands have much fiercer hybrids than Kinoko and a much friendlier view of fighting than Snowchester - there's none of the seedy, underhandedness of fighting pits that George is familiar with. Instead, there's sunshine and sea salt in the air and the clashes of weapons, shouts of voices that they hear well before they see the entrance of the arena.

There's no string-bean boys or disgraced revolutionaries waiting out front but George doesn't doubt that Tommy and Tubbo would have dragged their group inside the moment they could get their feet through the gate. Dream must agree because he doesn't slow his pace; he's excited, and George can tell because he nearly leaves them behind in his eagerness. George hears Sapnap sigh.

“I'll keep up with him.” He says, longsuffering, and jogs after the yellow shape of Dream darting through the small crowd of people already gathered within the building.

It leaves George with Karl and Quackity, who he falls into step with.

“He's like a giant puppy when you promise him a good spar.” Karl says, amusement plain.

“He better have the spar of his life, after a week of travel for it to happen,” George tries to sound annoyed but even he can hear how fond the words are.

George glances at Quackity and, though he looks relaxed, George sees tension at the corners of his eyes. It's the kind of relaxation that isn't real.

He elbows him and Quackity jumps, turning to meet his eye with a glower.

“Ow, George.”

“Perk up, buttercup, we're just gonna watch Dream and then get out of here.” George lets the back of his hand brush against Quackity's as they walk. He isn't good with words the way Karl or Dream are, or as physically comforting as Sapnap. He hopes Quackity picks up on what he's actually saying, though.

Maybe he does, because he sees Quackity's shoulders lower.

"It'll be quick." Quackity says on an exhale.

"Blink and you'll miss it." Karl agrees, coming up between them and slinging an arm around both of their shoulders.

George keeps an eye out for Dream as they walk and they're able to find him soon enough - he's tall, and it's hard to miss the shimmering yellows of his cloak, nor the people he's standing with.

Technoblade is the tallest of them, dark blue hair tied up and near-black cloak draped over wide shoulders; Wilbur stands next to him, nearly as tall and looking in the wrong direction with the sort of bored expression that he used to wear in court, the one that told George he was actually just waiting for his chance to speak. George lets his eyes trail to Dream, and finds him standing still and smiling while Ranboo and Tommy bounce around him, Ranboo towering and Tommy practically the same height as him. Next to these giants, Tubbo and Sapnap look distressingly tiny. George can't wait until he can step back and see *Quackity* standing next to them all. He's going to tuck that image away to bring out when he's bored for the rest of their lives.

"- practicing for *ages*, Dream, you wouldn't believe it. The progress, man, the *progress!*" Tommy is saying as they come within hearing range, gesturing wildly with both hands.

"I believe you, Tommy." Dream says, smile growing. Dream had always liked these boys, letting them get away with all sorts of mischief when Phil brought them to visit; he'd been far more lenient with them than he had his fellow knights or George, that was for sure. That hasn't changed, either; George watches as he lets Ranboo unsheath Nightmare to examine the blade, lets Tubbo pinch the edge of his cloak to look at the craftsmanship, as Tommy talks in a tornado and Dream listens intently and nods. It's cute.

"Incoming," Karl whispers, distracting George from enjoying the view, but George is thankful for it when he snaps his eyes away and finds that Wilbur has spotted them. He feels Karl casually slip around Quackity, manoeuvring Quackity between him and George. Wilbur's eyes flick between the three of them, lingering longer on Quackity but ultimately ending on George.

"Your Majesty," He says, dropping into a shallow bow. George reads it as mocking, but that may just be the bitter resentment of his own at play.

"It's just George, actually." George corrects. "Hello, Wilbur."

"George." Wilbur smiles. "Of course. You're looking well."

"And yourself." George lets his eyes flick up to Wilbur's hair for just a moment, "The white suits you."

Wilbur's smile widens a fraction and he moves on, "And Mister Jacobs, Quackity. Good morning."

“Isn’t it?” Karl turns away from Wilbur and toward Dream. “So, when does this duel thing start? I’ve never actually seen Dream fight anyone except Sapnap, so we’re ready to go!”

“We were just waiting for you guys to catch up,” Sapnap chimes in, “Tommy tried to drag him into the ring before I even got here.”

“Two years, I’ve been waiting!” Tommy complains, “Two! Tell ‘em, Techno, tell ‘em I’ve been practicing with you. You’re teaching me everything you know, even!”

“Well, now, I dunno about *everything*. Enough to hold your own.” Techno speaks, voice deep and casual. George feels Quackity flinch and then cough, disguising the movement.

“Well, if Techno’s training you, then you’re definitely gonna have a few moves I’m excited to see.” Dream says as he retrieves Nightmare from Ranboo.

“Are you using *that*!?” Tommy nearly vibrates in excitement, only to deflate when Dream laughs and hands the sword to Sapnap, who settles it at his side, next to Schlorg.

“You don’t use real swords to spar.” Dream unhooks his cloak, folds it over his arm, and Sapnap takes that, too, the two of them very used to the ritual of preparing for a duel, “Those only come out when you mean it.”

“I mean it!”

“Is this a fight to the death?”

“...no.”

“Then we don’t mean it.” Dream clasps Tommy’s shoulder, “Are we using practice swords or is this hand-to-hand?”

This particular gathering of people is...contentious, but despite the distaste and outright disdain that runs both ways for many of them, they still all crowd around the edge of the ring when Tommy and Dream enter it. George ends up next to Techno, Quackity still firmly between him and Karl, with Tubbo and Ranboo squeezing in and Wilbur out of George’s sight but surely aware that that doesn’t make him out of George’s swinging range if he tries anything.

Sapnap comes to stand behind Quackity, further boxing him in as he leans down to whisper between him and George, loud enough for Karl and perhaps Techno to also hear, “Dream is such a nerd. Look how excited he is.”

“You’re just scared that Tommy will put up a better fight than you,” George teases, utterly sure that he is the only one of the three of them willing to mock Sapnap’s currently-lacking fighting abilities and also utterly sure that it needs to be done.

Sapnap punches him in the kidney and George screeches, jumping so hard he knocks into Technoblade, who steadies him with a surprised hand on his shoulder.

“The fighting stays *inside* the ropes, fellas.”

“Is that a challenge, Techno?” Sapnap asks immediately, leaning into George to look up at him, “We could go after Tommy and Dream.”

“Sorry, man,” Techno chuckles, sounding genuinely bummed, “We have some place to be after this. Maybe next time.”

“Some place to be?” Karl asks curiously, “Oh? I thought you guys just showed up for this.”

“Come all the way to Pandora for a duel?” Wilbur scoffs and George finally places him, hidden behind his brothers on the other side of Technoblade. “No, we have other things to attend to. And there’s Dream’s prize for winning - if he does, of course.”

“A prize?” Dream blinks, looking up from his stretches. George traces the way his shirt accents his biceps, the loose ties at his chest. He looks at ease, a light to his honey eyes that George has missed. It’s cliché, to say that Dream seems to bring the intensity of the sun with him wherever he goes, and yet, here George is, nearly squinting against his brightness.

“If you win.” Tommy smirks, cocky.

“Is it really a prize if we’re gonna give it to him either way, king?” Tubbo asks, sounding genuinely curious.

“It’s an *incentive*, Tubs, shut the fuck up!”

“You think he needs *more* to win?”

“Hey! You’re supposed to be on my side!”

“Tommy,” Dream says, refocusing Tommy’s attention as just as he is finishing his stretches and shaking his shoulders out, feet carefully placed. “Let’s start.”

Dream raises his wooden sword. For a brief, brief moment, George sees XD and his glowing sword, enchanted wood - and then he blinks and it’s Dream again. George swallows. He can hear Sapnap breathing shallowly, as caught up in the new tension as George is. It’s been over two years since George has seen Dream spar with anyone except Sapnap and George knows that Sapnap is feeling the same fizzles of *bright* under his skin that George is.

This is Dream’s natural habitat; in a ring, playful and enjoying himself. Tommy makes the first move, lunging, and Dream sidesteps with a laugh, practically glowing from it as the duel commences.

Tommy *is* good. Techno has trained him well. George is no swordsman, but he’s spent his whole life watching people who are trained to handle swords handling them and he can recognize the mark of a good swordsman. Tommy is *good*. He retreats quickly, re-readies his sword, attacks again.

Dream stays on the defensive, watching. He dodges and weaves, dancing backward as if he has eyes in the back of his head, one hand behind his back as he teases and taunts. Were this a real fight and Dream did this, it would be a disrespect - but it’s only a duel, and he’s just having fun. Tommy isn’t taking it too seriously, for all that he’s on the offense, laughing and

quipping back when Dream jokes, smiling wide when he seemingly manages to slip past Dream's defenses and gets much, much closer than usual before Dream retreats again.

"Good," Dream praises when he's once again out of reach, "I can see how much you've improved, even from the last time we fought."

"Oh, don't bring that up," Tommy wilts, sword tip lowering a half-inch, "That wasn't my brightest moment, you know."

"I'm still waiting for my apology!" George calls into the ring, just to be a dick, and Tommy ducks his head, flushing.

"I said sorry!" He yelps, "Sure, I did! In the castle, I'll bet, you just don't remember it, seein' as you was busy with - *you know*, and things, and such, but I definitely - no, I definitely said it!"

"Pay attention, Tommy," Dream says, having snuck up on him while he was distracted with George, and taps Tommy in the side. Tommy jumps with a shriek, whirling his sword around, and Dream disarms him, the wooden weapon skittering across the packed dirt.

"Check." Dream smiles. "Good job."

"One more!" Tommy demands, "That's cheating, that wasn't fair! You've got your Gogy *distracting* me, mate, that's not -"

"One more!" Ranboo calls from the sideline, and the chant is quickly taken up by Tubbo and, to George's amusement, Quackity and Karl.

"Fine, okay, fine!" Dream puts his hands up placatingly, "One more. Serious this time."

"*Serious*, this time." Tommy agrees and goes to collect his sword.

When they face each other again, the teasing has stopped, though both are still obviously excited, Dream smiling and Tommy nearly bouncing in place. Both of their eyes slide to the little cluster of friends that George is in the middle of.

"Go," Techno calls, as if he'd been made referee by unspoken request, and they're both off.

Dream is not defensive this time. He attacks with vigor and puts Tommy on the run almost immediately; he has to focus on keeping Dream's sword from coming down on his head and, though he's as tall, if not taller, than Dream, he doesn't have nearly the same muscle mass that Dream does and the outclassing is obvious. Tommy is forced back as his brothers all shout advice and encouragement, including Techoblade.

George stays quiet, knowing how this will end and just enjoying the show. Dream is happy and it shows - his smile is wide, his eyes bright. He hasn't worked up much of a sweat but his skin sheens a bit in the sunlight coming down through the open roof of the arena, his muscles shifting under the well-fitted shirt he's wearing. He looks nice. George appreciates the view.

He also appreciates the movement of Dream's body; Dream is sure on his feet, in his actions. Used to swinging through branches, Dream is practically weightless for all his height as he dances around the arena, herding Tommy in any direction he wants to. At one point, though, Tommy releases the pressure behind his sword and action rolls away as Dream stumbles into the empty air, which garners a cheer from Tommy's peanut gallery and an approving grin from Dream, much to Tommy's obvious pride.

Still, spars are meant to be short. And while Tommy has progressed in his training, he isn't yet near enough to Dream's level to pose the sort of threat that would lead to a prolonged spar like Sapnap or Techno might. After his duck-out, Dream chases Tommy down, pinning him with forceful swipes to his flanks as Tommy walks backwards, babbling chatter that Dream doesn't respond much to except to occasionally tease him about. It ends when Tommy trips over his feet when he flinches from an attack, stumbling. It's a weakness Dream won't let pass and his sword sweeps behind Tommy's knees, knocking him to the ground.

George watches as Dream points the tip of his wooden sword to Tommy's throat.

"Check." Dream says.

Tommy collapses into the dirt, groaning loudly. "This is bullshit."

"How?" Dream pulls the sword back and offers a hand, which Tommy takes. Tommy gets his feet under him again, rubbing at his back as Dream helps dust him off, and this must be the signal they were waiting for because both Tubbo and Sapnap duck under the ropes to get into the fighting circle, whooping in what sounds like a harmony as they crash into Dream and Tommy.

"They're not even out of the ring and they're already talking about next time," Quackity says softly, just loud enough for George to hear. It's not at all his usual level of enthusiasm, but George is honestly impressed that he's willing to speak at all, with how uncomfortable he must be with this particular group. George can admit that he's a bit prickly with most of them, too, after the whole stabbing incident, and Wilbur being around; but if Quackity is willing to put up with it and Dream is having a nice, hopefully brief, time with them, and Sapnap and Karl are ready to step in when necessary, then George can deal, too.

"Get ready to *only* hear about this duel for the next week." George sighs, "It lasted all of ten minutes but they're going to be deconstructing and analyzing every twitch each of them made until they can replay it from memory like a little roleplay."

"Did someone say roleplay?" Karl perks up and Quackity actually giggles, covering his mouth and ducking his shoulders. Karl had draped his cloak around Quackity during their walk to the arena and Quackity hides his cackling in the bunched fabric.

"Not *that* kind of roleplay, idiot," George scoffs, but he can't help the smile, either.

"Not that I don't love the sneak peek into what happens when the five of you are alone," Techno intones, "But we're runnin' a little behind on that prize we got waitin', if you're all ready to head outta here."

“Dream!” George calls, “Do you really want this prize?”

Dream blinks, pulling away from the others at the sound of George calling his name. He looks thoughtful and glances at Tommy, saying something too quietly for George to pick up. Tommy nods enthusiastically, looking genuinely excited and Dream shrugs, giving George the sort of apologetic, puppy-dog stare that would have had Kinoko in a war at Dream’s word, if George had become king.

“Fuck,” George sighs. “Okay, then get your ass moving! Techno says we’re late.” He turns to Technoblade, refusing to let himself be intimidated by him. “Where’s this prize, exactly?”

“With Phil,” Techno looks down at him, appraising, “At the docks.”

The docks. Well. George had wanted to check out the ocean, anyway, hadn’t he?

The docks aren’t far - it’s a thirty minute walk, Wilbur insists, though Ranboo waits until he’s out of earshot before informing them that it’s actually fifteen and Wilbur just got them lost along the way.

However long the walk is, George is used to filling travel time with his friends. Dream immediately continues rambling on and on in the background with Tommy, the two of them chattering a mix of trash talk and genuine advice, talking about the offensive attacks Dream had used and Tommy’s steady improvement with blades. Sapnap chimes in with tips on Tommy’s on defenses that Tommy pretends he isn’t listening to at all, though George is sure he’s absorbing it as deeply as Tubbo and Ranboo seem to be, who are hanging off every word either of George’s best friends say. Techno joins in, even, much to Dream’s glee, and then all bets are off on if George is going to get away from these people until perhaps dinner time.

Not wanting to think about that, George sticks with Karl and Quackity, both of them careful to keep Quackity in the middle and well out of ‘oh, we’ve just happened to bump into each other, how about a chat?’ range of any unwanted political peers. It’s mid-conversation, a bit after they’ve reached the actual docks of the city and are being led toward where the ships are docked, just as he is about ready to push both of his annoying friends into the water for their antics, that Philza’s cry breaks the air, interrupting them all.

“Boys!” The vaguely familiar voice calls, “Did you win?!”

“Yes!” Tommy shouts, at the same time the rest of them chorus, “No!”

George looks around for him but doesn’t spot him until Phil laughs, and waves his hands, “Wait there! I’ll bring them down to meet you!”

He’s *on* a gangplank, which leads up to a relatively big merchant ship, his wings spread for balance, hat in hand. George watches him disappear onto the ship, steps a little unsteady but ultimately unbothered about it.

George frowns, “Them? Who is he talking about?”

Tommy has a grin on his face that could either be alternatively terrifying or reassuring when George turns to him, but there's no mistaking the excitement in his eyes. He bounces on the balls of his feet next to Dream, grabbing his elbow and yanking him forward a little. Glancing at Tubbo and Ranboo gives George no clues, though they both have that same excitement that lights Tommy up. Techno is unreadable as ever, and Wilbur isn't even looking up at the gangplank; George returns to staring at where Phil disappeared, hoping for an answer.

Two people appear after a short pause and begin making their way down - one a bit unsteady, the other with the sure-footedness of an experienced sailor. The way the sun is, sitting high in the mid-afternoon sky and beating down on them, casting shadows, they are no more than dark figures. George steps up to Dream's side as they both shield their eyes, squinting to make out exactly who this stranger is. Phil is easy to pinpoint, his wings recognisable shapes even in shrouded shadow - but the other; George makes out a long coat, tricorn hat, tumbling curls and curved horns that spark as familiar just as it hits George right in the gut who this figure is.

Phil and his guest step off the gangplank, the angle of the sun finally shifting out of George's eyes, and George feels recognition strike Dream as well. His own mouth falls open, a faint exclamation of "Oh my gods..." escaping him as they take in the sight.

Behind them, he hears rather than sees Sapnap come to Dream's other side. George *feels* Dream go rigid and tense right beside him.

The figure spreads out her arms. There are a few more lines to her face, but her eyes are exactly as George remembers them from all those years ago.

Frozen solid, Dream manages to find his voice.

"*Puffy?*"

Quackity is having a...well, a good day might be a stretch, but a *fine* day. He loves his fiances and his friends, but he's *missed* Tommy and Tubbo, more than he had even realised. Tommy had gotten so tall, and Tubbo is starting to lose the baby fat around his cheeks. Even Ranboo stands taller, with more confidence than Quackity has ever seen in him. He hasn't been able to talk to them much just yet, but even being around their excitement, hearing them again, it's familiar in a way that doesn't hurt. He wants to be able to talk to them, eventually, and maybe catch up on how things had been in their lives since - before he left, even. He hasn't *talked* to any of them in a long time.

With Karl's hand in his and his cloak around Quackity's shoulders, keeping his wings hidden from the world, even Technoblade doesn't seem as scary as usual. Which is good, because Technoblade seems to have spent the entire ten minutes since the fight discussing strategy with Dream and until this moment, neither has seemed inclined to stop.

Which just leaves Wilbur and frankly - Quackity has no idea what to make of Wilbur, as always. He looks vaguely stressed, but was there really any other way for the *great* politician Wilbur Soot to look? His hair is at least clean, and his face is full and he has the air of

someone who had been forcibly put to bed at least three times in the last week. When his eyes had met Quackity's in the arena, there had been an echo of that same jolt in Quackity's stomach at the sight of him. It wasn't sexual or romantic or even particularly *good* - that much was clear. Anything else was a lot murkier, but if he had to try and describe it, it would be uneasy recognition. *Oh. It's you.*

When Wilbur had bent down to whisper in Tommy's ear before the fight, his dark eyes still sparked with that same mischief.

Quackity had wanted nothing to do with that, so he had simply ignored him, held tight to Karl's hand and lost himself in bickering with George and Karl, grateful that they'd seemingly decided to play bodyguards for him during their stint with Phil's boys. Quackity hopes, as they reach the lines of bright sails on the water, that they won't stay too long. He isn't sure how long he can take Wilbur's eyes boring into the back of his skull, or Techno being so close - both reminders of things that he'd worked hard in the last years to accept and leave behind. If it were up to him, he would have skipped meeting up with any of them altogether, as bummed as he would have been to miss Tommy, Tubbo, and Ranboo, if not for Dream's desire to see the kids again.

And then Philza shouts, and then he is ushering someone forward, someone Quackity doesn't recognise, and -

"Oh my gods," George says, faintly.

Sapnap moves a second later, and Quackity clocks the tremor in his shoulders as he comes to flank Dream's other side, the three of them clearly recognising the person that Phil had brought to their party.

"*Puffy?*" Dream chokes out and Quackity realises immediately that there's *history* here, history he is not privy to, and that puts him on edge.

It's a woman; a ram hybrid, much to his instinctive discomfort. She's short, with long curls split down the middle - brown on one side and blond on the other - and big eyes, dressed like some sort of ship captain from a storybook. Her eyes are a surprisingly light brown - gold, when Quackity peers closer.

"Dream," She says, and she sounds choked up too but in an entirely different way, "Duckling, my duckling, you got so *tall!*"

She sweeps forward, her red coat trailing out behind her, and Dream barely has a moment to lift his own arms in return before she has pulled him into a tight hug. He *is* tall; taller than her for sure, and he has to bend down to wrap his arms around her shoulders.

Quackity can't see his face, but he can see Puffy's; relief, excitement, joy as she squeezes him with a large amount of force.

"I grew up," He hears Dream say and finally the name clicks into place.

Puffy, who brought Dream up on the open seas and left the water to raise him in Kinoko as George's knight, staying as head of the palace guard for a number of years. Puffy, who named Dream, who first taught him how to fight.

Puffy, who had left Dream several years ago, and who hadn't been seen nor heard from since.

Quackity squeezes Karl's hand, and Karl squeezes back just as tightly. He seems to have figured it out as well.

The hug finally breaks apart, and Puffy frowns, brushing back the bangs from Dream's face, dislodged during the embrace.

"I know I...I haven't been the best at keeping in contact, duckling," She begins, guilt tightening around the edges of her eyes. Quackity still can't see Dream's face. "I came back to Kinoko as soon as I heard about the coup. But by the time I arrived, you had already gone, and Philza said you were coming to Pandora and he needed the transport anyway...Gods, Dream, look at you."

There's something of a mother in the way that she holds him by the shoulders, a sister in the way that she speaks as much with her eyes as her voice. Something of a stranger in the way Dream is so tense under her hands.

"We've got so much to catch up on, Philza wouldn't tell me everything, and I wanted to hear it from you and, oh, I haven't introduced you to the new crew yet, I need to do that, but really Dream, I just wanted to tell you..." She smiles, like the sea; a little sad, a little cold, a little too welcoming, "I missed you, duckling. I missed you so much."

"I missed you, too," Dream says, hoarse.

"And look at you both, too!" She turns her attention to George and Sapnap, "George, I'm so sorry about your parents. They were good people."

George nods, jerkily, in the same way he does whenever someone outside of their group mentions his parents. It looks as if she's going to take his hand but George moves it first, casually brushing his hair out of his face.

"You... you've done so well. I've never been more relieved to get to Kinoko and not see *you* sitting on that throne. Well done. They'd be proud of the man you've become." Puffy swallows, as if to dispel the awkwardness, "And Sapnap! Your parents told me about what you did for George after the coup, and about your partners," She glances up, gives a quick smile to both Quackity and Karl, "Congratulations. You had better be keeping on top of your blocking!"

"Yes, ma'am," And Quackity knows that Sapnap is trying for a joking tone, but it comes out slightly strangled, "Dream keeps me on my toes."

"I'll bet he does," Puffy says, her gaze coming back to Dream, "You've grown up so much. I can barely believe it."

“That’s what happens.” Dream says, “Kids grow up, you know?”

“I know,” Faintly, and Quackity doesn’t even know if he’s seeing this right, but there is a flicker of something quietly devastated in her expression.

“Puffy,” Sapnap interjects, “This is…really unexpected, and we’d love to catch up when we can, but Dream just came out of a fight, and I think we’re all a little travel-lagged -”

“Oh!” She says, and takes a step back, “Oh, of course! I’m here for as long as Philza needs me to be, so…tomorrow? Back at the docks? All of you are welcome, we can catch up.”

“Right,” Dream says. Quackity doesn’t know why, but it reminds him of a branch breaking underfoot. A sudden, but not unexpected, snap. “Right. Puffy, it’s been a really long day -”

Puffy claps suddenly. “I know, I know, but just before you go, I want you to meet someone. My first mate; I wouldn’t get by without him. Foolish!?”

A man, supposedly Foolish, pops his head over the gangplank. Quackity isn’t sure exactly what kind of hybrid he is, but there’s definitely something there, in the emerald eyes and the razor sharp teeth and the golden fish fins. He rises from the ship, tall and well-built and golden in the sunlight, and easily makes his way to the dock.

“Hi!” He says, practically jogging up to them, specifically Dream, and sticks out a hand with a dizzying smile, shaking it vigorously when Dream limpy accepts. “Oh, man, oh man, I’ve heard so much; it’s real nice to meet you. Puffy hasn’t stopped talking about you for weeks!”

“Foolish…” Puffy says, sounding embarrassed, “Don’t overwhelm him, he’s tired.”

“Right!” Foolish says, dropping Dream’s hand, “Get some rest, maybe we can get to know each other tomorrow!”

“We should be going,” Sapnap says, as soon as Foolish bounds back up to the deck, “Thank you, though. It was… It’s great to see you again, Puffy.”

“Yeah,” Dream agrees, voice raspy, “Good to know you’re okay.”

“You too,” Puffy says, “Tomorrow?”

Dream nods, stiff, “Tomorrow.”

“Get some rest, Big D!”

That at least loosens Dream’s shoulders as he turns to look up at Tommy, already on the ship with Tubbo at his side and Ranboo leaning over them both.

“I told you not to call me that!”

“Fight me!”

“I already did!”

Tommy sticks out his tongue, and then he's gone; presumably to pester Phil along with Tubbo and Ranboo. Techno nods to Dream before they leave.

They walk away quickly, Dream quiet with shock and Sapnap trying to fill the silence. Quackity can still feel Wilbur's eyes on the back of his neck. He steps closer to Karl and Karl doesn't hesitate to drop an arm over his shoulders, pulling him close as they leave the docks.

Sapnap and George flank Dream the entire way home, and barely speak a word to either of them. Karl and Quackity follow, and don't attempt to break that bubble. Quackity can feel his shoulders starting to hitch up, his expression folded tighter and tighter; the only way he still feels somewhat grounded to reality is Karl's hand in his and the comforting weight of his cloak. There's a fog threatening to descend over his eyes, the cool grey fingers curling in his vision and pulling him into the past. Karl is warm, though. Karl is warm and squeezing his hand and won't let him drift away, and his cloak brings a calmness that helps settle him.

There's something simmering in the air. It's that undercurrent of anger, of resentment that sets his teeth on edge and trips up his instincts. It's not anyone's fault; certainly not Dream, reeling, or George, seething, or Sapnap, protecting. There's a history here that neither he nor Karl are yet privy too, and they won't force it into the open. At least, not until they get home.

"I'll make us some tea," Karl says, the moment that they get through the door to the apartment, pressing a kiss to Quackity's cheek and slipping out of his grip. Dream goes to the living room and sinks heavily into the sofa, his hands running through his hair, methodical and rhythmic. George begins to pace.

Quackity bites his lip and feels unmoored.

"Hey," Sapnap says, drawing his attention up and away from his spiralling thoughts, "Hey, Q. Can you look at me?"

"Yeah," Quackity says, swallowing hard, "I'm here, I'm sorry, I just... Bad thoughts."

"Techno?" Sapnap asks, and he isn't entirely wrong but Quackity doesn't feel up to explaining the mess that is his brain right now, especially when Dream is absolutely having a freakout a few feet away.

"Kinda. But I'm okay." Quackity reassures, "I'm not the priority right now."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Dream says, proving that he does, in fact, know exactly what they are talking about. His hands are still carding through his hair, now shoulder length, and twisting it into loose plaits and then brushing them out again.

"Dream," George says, voice tight, "Dream, it's *Puffy*."

"I did see her," Dream says, "Several years late. But she's...there. Here."

"She's here," George echoes, and sits down heavily next to Dream.

Karl bustles in with a tea tray, and shoves something hot and colourful into each of their hands. There is silence as they all stare blankly into their mugs.

“Dream,” Quackity ventures, “Are you okay?”

“Me?” Dream sits up, startled enough that some of the tea spills onto his knees. He doesn’t react to it at all, though Quackity can *see* how steaming it is. “I’m fine. Great, actually! I got to have a fight against someone who wasn’t Sapnap -”

“Hey!”

“And I won. I’m great.” Dream’s shrugs, shifting the mug in his hands.

Convincing. Quackity thinks sarcastically, and then feels bad for it. Quackity is well aware of the kind of mental gymnastics necessary to make things feel - less than they are. It’s hypocritical to judge Dream for this, when Quackity so easily did the same for years.

To try and banish the thoughts, he takes a sip of his tea. It helps to distract himself from the feeling of each of his senses cranking up to eleven. It’s a panic response, he knows; preparing him for fight or flight or freeze or fawn, whichever is most necessary at the time. He doesn’t *want* to do any of them.

These are his friends, even if the current atmosphere is triggering all of his instincts. He tries to focus on a sensation that isn’t the air against every centimetre of his skin, that isn’t each of their breaths and the scrape of their teeth as George and Sapnap both grind their jaws closed.

He can feel Karl against his back as he settles into stillness, and the idea of touch right now both comforts him and repulses him. Karl’s cloak is a welcome, *needed* weight around his shoulders, helping to keep him steady.

“Ignoring the comment about my fighting skills,” Sapnap says, lips pressing together, “That was... It was a surprise. To see Puffy.”

“A surprise.” Dream repeats. “Yeah.”

“How long has it been?” Karl asks, “Since you last saw her?”

“Eleven years.” Dream replies without a second thought, and then adds, like he needs to apologize, “Give or take. Nine years, if I don’t count the...time was weird, in the Nether. I guess. I mean, technically, it’s only been...s-seven? No..five, I guess, real years. Five, since I heard from her. I last got a letter from her just before my eighteenth birthday. So. Yeah.”

“Fuck,” Quackity says, “That’s rough, Dream.”

“And she’s just... waltzing in,” Sapnap frowns, grinding his teeth, shoulders still hiked up protectively, “like nothing ever happened. What the fuck was that?”

“That’s not fair, Sapnap,” Dream says carefully. “It’s hard to get a letter to the landlocked capital from a ship in the middle of the ocean. She came to find us when she heard what happened. She...she missed us. And I missed her. Obviously.”

George makes a noise like he is going to speak, but doesn't. Instead, he takes Dream's free hand and holds it tight.

"Is Puffy your, like, bio mom? Adopted?" Quackity asks, before he can think better of it, trying to get an idea of exactly what they're working with. He's *heard* about Puffy. He knows she's important to Dream. He doesn't know why Dream is talking about this so casually, if Quackity has come to the correct conclusion that she is his mom and she abandoned Dream in a castle where a throne ate his soul for a few months.

"She's not my mom," Dream clears his throat, voice steady enough that it sets Quackity's teeth on edge, too. He doesn't sound like he's just been reunited with his missing - guardian? He sounds like they've just run into an old friend. "She picked me up when I was a kid; nothing special. I was just...a kid in the mud, and she found me and took me on. I don't know. I don't remember it. I only remember the sea."

"What was it like?" Karl asks. "I don't remember if you've told us much."

"It was cool." Dream says, his voice almost wistful, "She was all I had, for a while. Her and the crew, I guess. She taught me how to fight and how to navigate using the stars and how to weather a storm. How to read and write, how to get out of a sticky situation. I really only remember the ship, and the port towns we stopped at, before we came to Kinoko when I was a kid."

"And then she left you there," Sapnap says, and it's sharp, biting in its bitterness. Quackity's hand tightens around his mug of tea. His knuckles, he registers vaguely, are white.

"Sapnap," Dream admonishes, "She stayed first. Four years on land is a long time for a sailor. The longest she'd ever stayed in one place. Karl," He looks up, shrugging lightly, "She's like you, a bit. That wanderlust. Maybe you get it."

Karl's eyes flick to Sapnap, uncertain as he considers his answer. Quackity doesn't like the flash in Sapnap's eye; something knowing, guilty, worried. They both know how flighty Karl was - still is, sometimes. How much it means for him to stay. How guilty it makes Sapnap feel, that he's kept Karl so still for so long.

"I do." Karl nods, eventually, slowly, "But I wouldn't do that. Leave for so long. I couldn't. There are...ways to appease wanting to travel and not...leave a whole kid behind in the process."

Dream's expression tightens and he frowns, but it isn't particularly angry. Just sort of annoyed, a casual sort of thing, like Karl had said something a bit insensitive, "She didn't just leave me behind. She made sure I was taken care of, with Bad and Skeppy, and the knighthood, and stuff. She covered her bases before she left. It's fine."

"Dude," Quackity says, finding his voice as Sapnap's face softens, with Karl securely at his side, unmoving, "You don't *have* to be fine. This is a big thing."

"It really isn't. I was worried about her. Now I know she's alive. She...she's just been at sea. That's fine." Dream lets go of George's hand and wraps them both around his tea. "I get that

you guys are upset but I don't want to be mad at her." His voice softens. "I just got her back."

Sapnap sighs, aggrieved, "You're always too fuckin' forgiving, Dream."

"It was a shock," Dream is at least willing to admit, "Just a shock. I'll talk to her tomorrow, and it'll be fine. I'll be fine. It's all good, guys."

"I don't, uh," Quackity says, clearing his throat, "I know that me and Karl don't know the full story. But we're here for you, Dream, you know that right?"

"I know." Dream smiles, properly; a little weak, but Quackity will take any smile from any of them right now, "Thank you, Quackity."

He takes a long swig of the tea, still steaming way too much for a whole gulp, and nods at Karl, "And thanks for the tea, Karl. You always know just how to make it."

"Let's hope I don't get you sick." Karl jokes with a wince, "I haven't been feeling my best recently. All this travelling really tired me out. I'm not used to it anymore."

Quackity frowns, "You're sick?"

"A little rundown," Karl waves it away, "I was gonna chew some root and head straight to bed for a nap, as long as you guys are okay."

"I'm fine." Dream repeats firmly. "Everything is fine. Are you okay, Q? You're kinda... shaky."

Quackity blinks, looking at his hands. His cup is trembling. He sets it down on the coffee table.

"Stressed," he admits. "Lots of things are happening right now and being around...*them* was a little harder than I thought it'd be. I'm okay. An early night sounds good, actually."

"An early night for all of us."

"Dream and I are going to sleep in the other bedroom tonight." George says, standing up and moving to the counter to start ripping apart some of the bread they'd left behind that morning, "You guys can have the big bed."

"Are you sure?"

"We don't need -"

George clears his throat loudly, interrupting. "We're gonna sleep in the other bedroom." he repeats.

George makes demands pretty often; all four of them tend to spoil him, especially Dream and Sapnap, but it's usually a playful thing. George is generally easy-going and uncomplicated; he likes to be comfortable, he likes to be safe, he likes access to his things, and with those, he's usually content.

This is not playful. Quackity has only heard George angry a handful of times, and he isn't sure that he'd count this as one of those times, but George is definitely feeling *something* verging on anger.

"Okay." Dream sets his tea down, half empty; his cup and Quackity's make a sad pair on the table.

It's not exactly - angry, the energy that settles around them. But Quackity is well aware of how quickly agitation breeds anger, and how quickly anger breeds into more. His instinct is to ask someone to go on a walk but he doesn't know *who* - Dream? Who is hesitant and hurting and doesn't sound like he *wants* to sleep in the other room tonight? George, who looks like he's one misplaced word away from pulling a rank he gave up on someone? Sapnap, who just looks *upset*? Karl, who would definitely help Quackity calm down, but who isn't feeling well at all and somehow Quackity sort of *missed* that today because he was caught up in his own shit?

Dream takes a deep breath, lets it out.

"I know you guys are upset for me." He says carefully. "And I appreciate it. Thank you. But this is...it's between her and me, right? I never stepped in when you fought with your mom, George. And I never stepped in when you and Bad butted heads in a bad way, Sap. I stayed where I belonged, *next* to you. Not in front. Right?"

Neither of them answer at first.

"I know you want to fight this battle for me." Dream catches the edges of his cloak, pulls it tighter around himself. "I understand. But it's mine. She's mine. So just stay where you guys belong for me, okay? Can you do that?"

"I hate it." Sapnap swallows. "I hate it. She hurt you a lot."

"I hate her." George spits and then presses his lips in a tight line and cuts his eyes away. "She made you *cry*, Dream."

"You've made me cry before, too." Dream says quietly and the room goes still.

George inhales sharply. He puts the last corner of the bread he was ripping apart down carefully. "I'm going for a walk."

"Wait," Dream stands up abruptly, eyes going wide, "That isn't - I didn't mean -"

"A walk." George says simply and that answers Quackity's question.

"I'll go with you." He says, standing up. He needs to get out of the apartment, too. Some air will do him good.

"George." Dream says, voice small.

"I'll stay where I belong, Dream." George says blankly, "But I need a moment. Come on, Big Q."

Quackity hurries to his side. He glances at Sapnap, who is staring with shocked eyes between his two friends, and Karl, who looks worried, and then he and George leave.

He waits until they're outside again, walking down the street in the opposite direction than they went this morning, to speak. "Do you want to talk?"

"No." George says quietly. "Let's just walk. Okay?"

"Okay." Quackity agrees.

They walk. They walk for nearly two hours. They don't talk through any of it but George eventually links their arms and Quackity appreciates it, the grounding touch. He feels better after escaping the tension, and he hopes George does, too. He hopes Karl and Sapnap are able to help Dream. Quackity has never seen Dream and George fight, not *really*. It's sort of scary; Quackity has always thought of the two of them like two halves of a whole. They aren't themselves without each other. In the same way that Quackity had had to learn who Dream was when he wasn't XD, he'd had to learn who George was too, with his memories intact. He wasn't *that* different but he was - *more*. Brighter, with Dream around. Like Dream brought out something in him that had been dormant, even when XD had been with them.

The idea that there might be problems between the two of them is something that should be common sense, but Quackity has genuinely never seen a *real* conflict between them before. On a day where Quackity already feels unbalanced, it's practically giving him vertigo.

But George is eventually ready to go back, and that reassures him.

"You're sure?" He asks, "We can keep going, dude."

"No." George smiles weakly. "I'm calm. I just needed a minute. He says things sometimes and it's like a slap in the face, but he doesn't mean them to be."

"Words are just like that sometimes."

"Yeah." George exhales, looking troubled. "Especially his. I should...apologise, maybe."

"Maybe."

"Definitely?"

"Definitely." Quackity admits. "His mom just showed back up again and you both went after him really hard."

"We did." George winces. "Not the time or place, probably."

"Probably not."

"Fuck." George says, leaning into Quackity. "Okay. Let's go."

They get a little lost on the way back but find their way thanks to a nice creeper hybrid selling gunpowder on a street corner just as evening begins to fall. Quackity opens the door

and it's to the sound of two people in the kitchen, the clanking of pans and the slow hissing of something being cooked.

He spots Karl sleeping on the couch, covered in Dream's cloak since his own is still around Quackity, which leaves the voices in the kitchen to the other two.

George follows close behind, his face a blank slate. Quackity had come to call it his Prince Face in his mind; it's what George does when he doesn't know what to do. He just...retreats into hiding it, like he was trained to do. George is no diplomat but he sure was raised with the skills of one.

They find Sapnap and Dream both bent over the stove, a sizzling pan on one burner and steam slowly drifting from the mouth of a pot next to it.

"I said I got it," Sapnap is grunting, both of their hands on the handle of a wooden spoon, "You're supposed to be in the living room with Karl, let me *cook*, Dream."

"You're burning it," Dream insists, "*You* go sit in the living room. You don't even know *how* to cook. I saw you almost put those spices on it and then none of us but you would be able to eat it!"

"That was a *mild spice*, it's basically like *salt* around here, you giant baby -"

"Wow, just say you hate humans and go, dude -"

"Don't start with me, fucker, I'm trying to make dinner so -"

"Boys." Quackity interrupts, unable to stop the small smile. "Your stew is boiling over."

"Quackity!?" Dream turns on his heels, leaving Sapnap to hurriedly lift the pot off the burner with his bare hands, "George!"

"We're back." George says awkwardly.

"You're back." Dream repeats.

"We're back." Quackity side-steps so George can't hide behind him. "I'm gonna help Sapnap with dinner."

"George -"

"Dream -"

They speak at the same time, much to Quackity's amusement. Soulmates, even when they're fighting.

"Can we talk?" George continues after a short silence, "Alone, for a second?"

"Yeah." Dream agrees immediately. "Bedroom?"

George silently offers his hand. Like he's just been offered the answer to peace across the world, Dream steps forward and takes it.

Quackity waits until he hears the bedroom door click shut and then throws himself at Sapnap, heedless of the stove.

"*Fuck*, Q! Carefully, holy shit, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Quackity says, shoving his face into Sapnap's neck and inhaling obnoxiously, making it very obvious that he's smelling him. Sapnap smells like himself - kinda spicy, *safe*. Quackity adores it.

"Yeah?" Sapnap's voice softens. He finally gets the hint and wraps his arms around his waist. They rock slowly, a soothing rhythm as the pot boils and the pan sizzles and a nice scent of food weaves through the air. Quackity lets the feeling of *home* settle in.

"Now I am, yeah." He says quietly. "Today's kinda sucked, actually."

"A bit." Sapnap admits. "You were so good with them at the arena, though, Q. Brave as fuck. You didn't even flinch, it was so badass."

"Yeah?"

"Fuck yeah," Sapnap laughs into his hair. His arms are perfectly in place, not pressing into Quackity's wings at all, even with them covered by the cloak. Sapnap just knows how to hold him. "Seriously, angel. You were amazing. No wonder Wilbur's still panting after you."

"*Sapnap!*" Quackity squawks, batting at him, and Sapnap laughs, pinning him into the hug so he can't get any power behind the swipes, "You said you wouldn't fucking joke about it anymore, you *said that* -"

"I said I wouldn't *around him*," Sapnap ducks low and presses a sweet kiss to Quackity's forehead, freezing him in place. "Let me have this, Big Q. I ask so little."

"None of you are as funny as you think you are." Quackity subsides, unable to resist the warm hug.

"We're *so* funny. You love us so much. It'd be embarrassing, except we love you just as much."

"You're such a fucking corndog. Karl is rubbing off on you."

"In more ways than one," Sapnap drops his voice into a growl - it's more funny than sexy, and Quackity laughs, shoving Sapnap off of him and stepping back.

"Speaking of, I'm going to check on him."

"Can you wake him up? He's been sleeping since the time you guys left. I wanna get some stew in him and then it's right back to bed."

Quackity waves to show he's heard and heads into the living room, beelining for the couch. Karl isn't breathing like he's sleeping - his breaths aren't deep like usual. Quackity drops to his knees by his face.

"Karl?" He calls quietly, "You awake, man?"

Karl doesn't move. His face is tucked into the back of the couch, nearly hidden under the cloak. Quackity would feel bad about waking him, except Quackity has slept at Karl's side every night for the last nearly-two years, bar roughly a week of absolute hell and some change. He knows what Karl sounds like when he's sleeping in nearly every state - well, sick, cold, warm, deep, light, peaceful, turmoil - and this isn't sleep.

"Karl?" he repeats a bit louder, "Sap made some food. Can you eat some stew for us?"

Karl shifts, slowly turning onto his back, much to Quackity's relief. He blinks and, in the shifting light of evening falling, his eyes appear almost silver.

He stares up at Quackity, still sleep-dumb. He must have been sleeping until just seconds ago, to still be this foggy.

"Hi," Quackity teases gently, brushing curls from his forehead where they've been pressed down in his sleep, "You awake?"

Karl blinks up at him, none of Quackity's words registering. Quackity frowns, wondering if he's caught Karl in one of his nightmares. They'd discussed them a few times, though Quackity knows that he'd shared more with Sapnap than he had with Quackity just yet. Night terrors are no stranger to Quackity, who often has them about his past, and often victimizes Sapnap upon waking, much to his chagrin.

"Kaaarl," he coos, "Come back to me, huh? Wake up. It's not real."

Karl breathes in slowly, deeply. He blinks again, and when he opens his eyes, he's awake. Quackity can just - tell.

"Q?" Karl mumbles, eyes fluttering rapidly as he starts to sit up, and then winces, a hand going to his head, "Ow."

"Headache?" Quackity frowns, "I guess the nap didn't help, huh?"

"Guess not," Karl pouts. "I'm still really tired."

"That's okay." Quackity reaches up to massage Karl's temples for him, humming when Karl immediately leans into his touch and closes his eyes, "Let's get some food in you and then I'll come lay down with you."

"That sounds *perfect*," Karl practically purrs, "Bless me with your divine presence, my angel, I'll sleep the slumber of the holy."

"Nevermind," Quackity drops his hands and stands up, "Sleep by yourself."

“Noooo,” Karl immediately whines, even as he winces at himself, “Baby, come back!”

“Come on, idiot,” Quackity tugs at his shoulder, “*Food*. You can flirt after.”

Still whining, Karl climbs off the couch, taking a moment to fold Dream’s cloak and set it down on the cushions.

The two of them convene at the counter with Sapnap, who’s dished up a stew and steak combo, two more servings already set aside for Dream and George. Karl looks around curiously but nods in understanding when Sapnap hooks a thumb toward the closed bedroom door.

Halfway through their quiet meal, said door opens and their missing pair join them, hands clasped tight between them. Whatever was said in the privacy of the bedroom, it seems to have soothed the hurt feelings between them because Dream smiles again and it’s real when he sees them all sitting.

“All good?” Sapnap asks carefully when they’re sitting.

“All good.” George says firmly. “We’re going to keep our opinions to ourselves regarding the Puffy situation and let Dream handle it. *But*, if you and I think things are getting out of hand, Dream is willing to hear us out.”

“Reasonable.” Sapnap agrees. “I can agree to those terms.”

“Thank you.” Dream says, sincerely. “Now, let me eat the steak I made, I’m starving.”

Sapnap screeches and Quackity and Karl both laugh, though Karl is more subdued than normal. Dinner goes on, the air between them clear and *normal*. Quackity lets himself relax amongst his friends again, tangling one hand with Karl’s and squeezing. After, he leaves the clean up to the others and joins Karl in the main bedroom. They both strip down to their underclothes and climb into the bed, Karl’s cloak a familiar weight on top of the blanket.

“Goodnight, Karl.” He whispers, fluttering gentle kisses to his forehead to help soothe him.

Karl sighs, relaxing under the physical affection, and is asleep before Quackity stops.

Quackity lies with him, stroking fingers through his hair, down his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat as he begins to breathe in and out slowly, deeply. Sapnap appears soon enough, stripping down to his boxers to join them on Quackity’s other side.

“Dynamic duo sleeping in the other room?” Quackity whispers his question.

“Fucking in the other room, more like,” Sapnap matches his volume, nose wrinkling cutely, and Quackity holds back the laugh, shoulders shaking subtly.

“Crass.” He admonishes, and then adds, “I wish that were us.”

“Too horny, bring it down a notch,” Sapnap winks, “Maybe tomorrow. We’ll sneak into an alley or somethin’.”

“No the fuck we won’t.” Quackity sniffs and turns back to Karl, who would never imply that they would fuck in an *alley*. Even if the idea was kinda hot.

Sapnap snakes an arm over his waist, fire-hot and almost burning except for how fucking good he feels. Quackity hadn’t realized how cold he was until Sapnap’s furnace of a body presses up along his back, shoulders to feet. Gods.

He thinks of that feeling he’d had when he’d seen Wilbur. Recognition. It doesn’t compare to *this* even a little. Recognition had meant something to him, once. But he craves *this*, more than he’d ever craved that. Being between them was to be so...Quackity isn’t sure he has words for it. Known, perhaps. They make him feel so known.

He falls asleep like that. He’s content with it all, despite the sucky day. Hopefully the morrow will be better.

It isn’t a nightmare that wakes Quackity up, which is shocking in and of itself. After the day he’d had, the reminders of...everything, he’d expected to wake up in the night at least once, shaking and seeking comfort in the arms of Sapnap and Karl. He *does* wake up, but he isn’t...shaken. He hadn’t been having a nightmare. Something is just pinging as...wrong, and it has activated his paranoia. *That*, at least, he could blame on the day’s events. He’d started to grow out of waking up at every shift in the air.

Something is wrong, though. He can feel it, right down to his bones, a certain uncertainty that leaves him unmoored, grasping for something solid. He reaches out to his left - Sapnap, curled on his side, his breathing deep and easy. His face is so relaxed in sleep; Quackity is never going to get over how much younger he looks when he sleeps, the way the years fall away until he really is only a young man with too much tragedy behind him.

He reaches out to his right, and comes up only with an empty bed.

Karl.

“Karl?” he whispers in sleepy confusion.

There’s shuffling off to the right. Through the shadows being cast by the moon, he can just make out a figure sitting on the window seat. The moonlight is bright, shining through the glass, and he knows it’s Karl, but he’s facing away, out to the glass, nothing but a silhouette.

“I’m here,” Karl breathes out, and it’s barely audible. It sounds odd, like a strange whisper instead of Karl’s voice.

“What’s...” Quackity struggles to sit up, blinking the sleep from his eyes, “What’s up? Karl?”

“I couldn’t get back to sleep. I was worrying about Dream.”

Karl’s voice is...strange. It sends shivers up his spine, and not in the way it usually does. There’s a faraway note to his voice, something distant that Quackity hasn’t ever heard from

him before. His voice, now that he's a bit louder, isn't just breathless. There's almost too much breath, like he's compensating for something muffling his words.

"Then I was too hot. It felt like my skin was burning, even my eyes were..."

"Karl, what's wrong?" Quackity finally shrugs off the sleep and convinces his brain to wake up, slipping out of bed to walk towards Karl. His harried movement makes Sapnap stir, a confused groan as consciousness is unceremoniously dumped upon him.

"No, don't come any closer!" Karl says, panicked, *afraid*, and Quackity freezes. He's in his boxers, staring at the back of his fiancée's head, and he has no idea what's going on except that something is terribly, terribly wrong.

"Karl, I just wanna help you, alright?" He tries to take on the gentle tone that they use when he's panicked, or when one of them has a nightmare. It's hard, though; his shoulders are tense and he can feel the adrenaline and cold air of the room starting to make his teeth chatter. He hears Sapnap sit up, sees him glancing between the two of them with sleepy confusion out of the corner of his eye, "Can you tell me what's happened?"

"I went to the bathroom," Karl says, still in that distant, breathy voice, "to wash my face to try and cool down and I..."

Finally, Karl turns to look at him. It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust in the darkness.

On the bed, Sapnap sucks in a sharp breath, and a horrified gasp catches in Quackity's throat. The guilt immediately sinks into his stomach, but he can't concentrate on that. He can only see Karl and how the moonlight picks out each of his features with cruel comprehension.

His eyes catch Quackity's and Quackity can see the fear in them despite almost the entire lack of anything else. His eyes, normally bright and reflective, are pale, almost a moon in their own right, *silver* instead of their familiar blue, and near sightless, pupils gone. His face, even over just a few hours, seems more drawn, washed out, but what breaks Quackity's heart most is how close he looks to tears. He has his hands over his mouth, fingers slightly spread to let his voice out.

"It's okay," Quackity says, and he fights to keep his face calm, reassuring, because he doesn't want to make Karl any more scared. He draws on his envy of George's Prince Face and tries to emulate it. "It's... it's alright. We'll figure this out."

"Karl." Sapnap gently asks him, "Show us, darlin'. We only want to help."

Karl slowly lowers his hands from his mouth and Quackity can't help it. Another shocked gasp escapes, but he's moving before he even comprehends either the sound or the steps - catching Karl's hands in his own as Karl begins to snifle.

When Karl looks at them, face bared, they can see the sharpened teeth jutting from his jaw, cutting over his lips, stuck awkwardly between being grown and being comfortable. They're vicious and oddly-sized, too big for Karl, too sharp for his soft speech patterns. They're

terrifying, but they don't scare Quackity, not half as much as the thought of Karl thinking he's afraid of *him* instead of what's *happening* to him.

It takes a moment, but arms fold around them both. Sapnap, joining them on the seat, bringing heat to the chill of their fear.

"W-wow," Sapnap breathes, shaky, "Um. I appreciate you leaning so hard into my biting kink, but you didn't have to go *this* hard."

Karl yelps a teary laugh. "Anything for you, hotstuff."

"Hey, hey," Quackity soothes, reaching up to brush at the corners of his eyes, catching small beads of wet and gentling them away, "It's okay, Karl, come on, don't cry. They look very cute on you. A-and, you know, your eyes are very..."

"Nice." Sapnap supplies, lamely.

"Th-thanks, guys," Karl snuffles, words muffled around the fangs, "I w-was really worried about this. Like, my whole, um, the whole eyes thing was a bit of a shock, an-and growing fangs, and all, but I guess it's cool as long as we can still get freaky."

"Oh, yeah, no, don't worry," Sapnap carefully presses a thumb to one fang and winces. Blood immediately swells at the tip of his finger where it'd brushed the fang. "We can work with this."

"Yeah?" Karl takes a deep, shaky breath, "Okay, cool, I'm glad that makes - that makes two of us down with it. I'll be honest, I'm freaking out, but hey, at least I can still get laid, at least I can -"

"What *happened*?" Quackity cuts in, wanting to reach the root of the problem, "How?"

"I - I don't *know*," Karl starts to breathe a little funny, voice breaking. "I don't - I don't understand, I don't know -"

"Okay." Sapnap says calmly. "Well, we'll figure it out. Simple as that."

"Yeah? Yeah. Yeah! Yeah, we'll - yes. Yeah. Totally." Karl giggles, hysterical. "We'll figure it out. The fucking - whooo, boy. Yep. Haha, yeah! We'll figure it out."

And then he's just *sobbing*, all at once, burying his face in Quackity's shoulder and Quackity hugs him close, looking to Sapnap in shock and horror. Oh, fuck, oh *fuck* - Quackity doesn't know what's scarier, the changes or the fact that Karl is breaking apart so thoroughly over them.

"We'll figure it out." Sapnap says, holding them both tighter, and Quackity pretends he doesn't sound as out of his depth as he does. It's all he can do to stop himself from joining Karl in tears.

It feels like his heart is breaking when he feels more than he hears Karl speak, murmuring into his neck and mixing with the tears.

“I think...I think there’s something really fucking wrong with me.”

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Hello!!!! Thank you all for your theorising and excitement - we love seeing it, please keep theorising and letting us know what you think in the comments.

ALSO

We have some incredible fanart for this fic, and if we've missed any/you have any LET US KNOW!!! WE WANNA SEE AND APPRICIATE U PROPERLY (and I am only mortal and also dumb ;P)

[THIS beautiful piece](#)

[This, from last chapter!](#)

Also a reminder that we have a discord server [here!!](#) Hop in for fun chats, maybe some sneak previews and weekly readings of the new chapters with us and the rest of the server and some EXCELLENT art from our talented gang (including our amazing beta Jess!) that hasn't been posted yet :D

as always, love you all, and thank you so so much for continuing to support our little fic!

Here's what Karl doesn't know how to tell the others; he had no idea anything was seriously wrong until fangs had sprouted up and cut into his lip.

It would probably have been easier, he thinks, to have known and hidden it. Then he could have just apologized and told them the truth so they could work it out. Figuring it out at the same time as them? That fucking sucks. Karl is a *great* researcher, but he doesn't have his library; instead, he has a lot of stress in one room, himself and Sapnap and Quackity all trying to process at once, and he can't get his thoughts together.

Still, it's not all bad. Sapnap had run his fingers over the unfamiliar, pointy protrusions in his mouth and Quackity had held him tight while he cried.

It's there he remains, his face pressed into Quackity's hollow breast bone as the tears dry and the shock starts to fade. Sapnap had slipped out of the room a few minutes ago, after Karl had sent him to find the others. There's no point hiding and he has a feeling he won't be able to keep his new features from George and Dream for long. He finds he doesn't want to, anyway; he'd feel better with all of them here so they can at least all freak the fuck out together. Get it over with.

Karl's a little frustrated with himself, now that things have calmed down. He doesn't *know* and it's pissing him off. He has no idea what could have caused this; if they were home, he could maybe argue that it was some ingredient or experiment gone wrong, a byproduct of

spending so much time and so many resources on Dream's cloak, but he hasn't touched anything odd or magical in almost a week!

Maybe it's a curse? Maybe something from his traveling days had finally caught up to him? He's pissed off a witch or two, definitely a forest spirit, not to mention dozens of fellow alchemists. He's not led a clean life, to say the least, and he wouldn't be *shocked* if something or someone had found him, but he thinks it's a bit bullshit that it had to happen *now* of all times.

The worst part of it isn't the teeth, honestly, or the eyes, or even that his body doesn't feel like his own. It's the pull. The pull toward something he can't place, just a gentle tugging that aches to lead him to *something*. It's different from the wanderlust that had finally driven him from the mansion - it's more. It's something somehow more instinctive and that's what makes his stomach roil and nausea burn in the back of his throat.

He wants to crawl out of his skin, almost. It itches that he's just sitting here instead of following. It's like he's feeling something tugging at his awareness, at everything he is, and wanting it to be something else. His teeth are too big for his mouth. They bite into his cheeks and he swallows copper and crimson and somehow it isn't *enough*. He wishes it was just metallic. He wishes that there wasn't something bubbling, brewing in the back of his mind at the taste of it.

Quackity's heartbeat thrums in his ears, faster than usual but slower than it had been. Karl is so very *aware* of the blood pumping just beneath Quackity's skin. Karl shudders as the odd thought crosses his mind and in response, as if he can feel the same stress that Karl is feeling, Quackity hums, pulling him in tighter and rubbing small circles into his back. Karl finds his face turned right into Quackity's neck, that delicate butterfly pulse a mere fraction of an inch away. He tastes more blood and has to swallow roughly, sitting back. Quackity lets him, eyes big and pretty in the moonlight.

If Karl had any more tears to cry, he'd shed them for how worried Quackity looks over him. Karl's mostly just pissed about not having access to his resources so he can fix this shit, now that he's had a bit more time to process everything, but Quackity and Sapnap have been so brave despite the fucking fangs now protruding from his lips and the weird corpse eyes. Quackity, with prey instincts the size of the mansion, had kissed him and held him, let him press those sharp fangs to the hollow of his throat, had trusted him unwaveringly despite none of them knowing what the hell was happening.

"Quackity..." Karl starts, and doesn't even know how to finish. His breath hitches in the middle of the name and Quackity is there immediately.

"I'm here." Quackity murmurs. "You're okay."

"I'm not," Karl says miserably, "I'm not, I've turned into a weird monster thing -"

"Stop." Quackity says, "Don't even start. You know that if this happened to us, instead, you wouldn't even think about calling us monsters. You wouldn't even let us think that word about ourselves, so don't start. Your eyes almost match mine, and Sapnap has fangs, too,

even if they're a little smaller. Between you and me, I'll bet he's kinda jealous that yours are bigger."

Karl bubbles a laugh, weak as it may be.

"This is so embarrassing," he lets himself admit. Someone had really gotten the drop on him. He's settled into this being a curse of some sort, and it's powerful enough that it managed to get past *all* of his precautions. Someone had shown him up in the middle of the fucking night and now he's freaking out so bad that he's freaked *them* out. He doesn't know who, or what this stranger used, and he won't be able to break it until he figures out at least one of those things.

He has no idea what the extent of the curse is; if it stops at eyes and teeth, or if the new tugging will grow, or if this fucking *copper* on his tongue will become more addicting as the desire for more swells.

"I don't know -" he starts, putting his face in his hands. "I don't know. I don't even know if I can trust myself right now, Big Q."

Will the curse move on? Change him on a more intrinsic level?

Quackity pulls him into a tight hug and Karl lets him. Quackity's heartbeat flutters against Karl's lips, his chest caught in a breath. Quackity stamps a fierce kiss to the top of his head.

"I trust you." He murmurs, into Karl's hair, "Even if you don't trust yourself, trust me. No matter what happens, you're *you*."

They're sweet words and Quackity's confidence feels like a warm drink shoved into Karl's hands, warming him from the inside out. Karl hugs Quackity back, holds him close and just lets himself feel the comfort.

From outside the room, he hears low voices, a nervous patter of footsteps. Karl feels nerves in his belly, rapidly rising.

"I'm scared," he admits, because there is no point in secrets now, even if he had any to keep.

Quackity doesn't get a chance to respond before there is a tentative knock on the bedroom door.

"Karl?" Sapnap calls through the door, "I've got the others. I told them about the...tooth thing."

"Tooth thing." Karl repeats back, sitting back to scrub over his face. "Come in!"

The door pushes open and Karl watches the kerfuffle of Sapnap and Dream getting stuck as they both try to come in at the same time and run into each other, blocking the way. George ends up shoving them both to the side to come through first, so at least Karl has a bit of amusement before he turns into a pale-eyed, sharp-toothed ball of *something* and passes on to the other side.

“Sapnap said you grew *fangs*?” George looks around the dim room and then turns the bedside lantern on, bathing them all in light and making it easier to view Karl’s shame.

“I did.” He has to swallow again, “And my eyes are weird.”

“What weird shit have you been touching?” Dream demands as he finally makes it into the room and comes to kneel at Karl’s feet, reaching up to cup his face and tilt it toward the light. He pulls Karl’s bottom lip down to get a better view of the new biters.

“Nothing!” Karl defends himself, muffled by Dream examining his teeth. “I haven’t even gone supply shopping yet!”

“Well, obviously something is up,” George frowns, brow furrowed in the way it only gets when George is genuinely upset.

“Obviously.” Sapnap sits at Karl’s side opposite Quackity, laying a warm hand on his thigh. “Do they hurt?”

“Just my cheeks,” Karl admits. “And I can see fine, even though my eyes...”

Karl isn’t sure how he hadn’t woken them all up with the pitchy squeak he’d made upon first seeing himself in the bathroom mirror. His eyes had looked *empty*, almost, until he’d been able to distinguish between the pale silver of his irises and the whites of his eyes - and that isn’t even mentioning his *teeth*.

“It could be a curse.” Dream thinks aloud, echoing Karl’s thoughts, running a careful finger over one fang. It’s really weird, having someone touch a tooth. Karl feels the touch but not the warmth of skin. He tastes the blood when Dream nicks himself with a wince. He tastes the blood *too much*.

“You don’t lack for enemies.” George agrees. “Maybe. But you’ve taken precautions against curses and darker magic, haven’t you?”

“Of course,” Karl huffs, affronted. “It was the first multi-step spell on my cloak, and I sleep with that almost every night! I would have felt it, at least, if it were a curse!”

He thinks. He’s not ready to admit out loud that someone might have outsmarted him, though; he’ll give his pride some time to heal before he has to tell all of them.

“Maybe being in the city is causing it?” Dream offers. “You could have some recessive hybrid traits that Pandora is causing to emerge. A hoglin, maybe.”

“I am *not*,” Karl hisses, “a *hoglin* hybrid, *Dream*. I’m human. I’ve always *been* human.”

“Prime, okay,” Dream puts his hands up in a sign of surrender, “Biting my head off about it won’t stop it from being true, if it is, but...it wouldn’t be unheard of, for hybrid traits to show up this late, but these don’t look like tusks. They look like fangs. They definitely feel like fangs. And your eyes...but you can see?”

“As good as usual,” Karl reaches up to press against his eyelids, rubbing carefully. “This just isn’t my night, fellas.”

“Has anything else weird been going on?” George sits on the edge of the messy bed, looking conflicted. “Dream and I were gonna bring it up when we got home, but some pretty strange stuff was happening on the way here. What was that about?”

“My nightmares?” Karl hesitates, “Were they that weird? I don’t...remember much. A lot about me, like...running off. I thought I was just going stir-crazy in the mansion.”

“The nightmares are one thing, but you barely seemed to recognize me when I tried to snap you out of it.”

“*Huh?*” Karl frowns. He doesn’t like the sound of this. He remembers the nightmares, as faded as they are now beyond an insistent sense of *wrongness*, but he has no idea what George is talking about.

“George, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

George pulls a face and exchanges a glance with Dream.

“I saw it, too.” Dream speaks up, “George told me he was worried so I kept an eye out. Last night, when it was your turn to keep watch, it was like you were...you, being normal, and then you looked at the fire and it, like. Caught you, almost. You didn’t look away from it your whole shift, and I think you would have kept going if I hadn’t shaken you out of it. You didn’t even say anything to me, you just...went to sleep. And, in the morning, you were back to normal.”

“Fuck.” Karl presses a hand to his mouth, barely noticing the new fangs against his palm. He feels sick. Maybe this curse has been on him longer than he thinks. If that’s the truth, then it’s escalating. How long? When had he started feeling weird? Had he even noticed feeling weird, aside from the dreams of him running off? “You’re not fucking with me?”

“Would we fuck with you at a time like this?” Dream asks.

“I don’t know,” Karl replies, a little hysterical, “It’s been a weird day. If I beg, will you please tell me you’re fucking with me? I’ve been told I’m good at it.”

“What do you remember?” George asks, completely ignoring the second half of his comment, “After the nightmares. When we would have to shake you back.”

Karl leans back against Quackity and tries to think. He’s been having nightmares for a long time, and being back to taking watches while traveling meant that he was only conscious enough to notice if there was any danger. Apparently not conscious enough to notice fugue states, though.

Last night, then. When Dream had shaken his shoulder; he vaguely remembers that. He remembers slipping into bed and, even under a haze of sleep, feeling more and more like himself the longer he’d been in his beloved’s arms.

Before that. The fire. Dream had said something about the fire, so Karl thinks; feels the strangeness of his soul not quite fitting right in his body; the itching urge to escape under his skin, the constant instant *tugging* towards something inexplicable he can't quite explain.

"Karl," Quackity says, and it's concerned, fingers digging into his arm, "*Karl*."

Karl blinks, and he's back in his body. Sapnap with a furrowed brow where he stands, and George and Dream with twin expressions of grim recognition. Karl resists the urge to cut the tension with a comment about wishing all the attention was on him for a different reason.

"Yeah," Dream says, gravely, "Just like that."

"You didn't say anything to us." Sapnap frowns, crossing his arms as he leans back against the wall. He looks between Dream and George, brows furrowing. "Why wouldn't you have brought this up? It sounds like something you should have brought up."

"We were going to!" George leans onto his knees. "When we got home. If it was just nightmares or waking terrors, the big city didn't seem like the right environment to talk about it in."

"And we didn't want to stress you out." Dream adds. "We know this is hard, Sap. Being away from home. The last thing you needed was us telling you something was up with Karl, and then having it turn out he was just stress-dreaming or something."

"You should have told me." Sapnap curls his shoulders in. "Especially if you were that worried about it. I don't like being kept out of the loop, and *definitely* not when it's something as important as this. Keeping things from me isn't going to make me feel any less stressed. You *know* that. We've been through it."

George frowns, looking ready to argue, but Dream speaks before he has the chance.

"You're right," he says, standing up to go to Sapnap and put a hand on his shoulder. "We should have told you. We didn't mean to keep things from you, we were just worried. It won't happen again."

"Sorry." George gives in, though he sounds a little less sincere about it.

"...Whatever.." Sapnap grumbles, rolling his eyes. "Just don't make a habit of it, *George*."

"Hey!"

"Could you maybe keep *us* informed too, actually?" Karl cuts in, incredulous, "Specifically when it involves someone outside of your three-way bromance?"

He'd be irritated, but he has long grown used to the three of them having their own little world. Sapnap always complains about Dream and George forgetting everyone else, but the three of them have the same habit with each other. It's cute, when it isn't keeping Karl's own weird behaviors from him.

“Yes, okay, we get it,” George sighs dramatically, “Tell the whole group when someone’s acting creepy, lesson learned, let’s move on.”

“Well, if the lesson is learned...” Quackity scoffs, but it’s light, and Karl feels himself relaxing as the bickering continues. Even with such tense subject matter, he feels safe here, with them.

“Anyway, back to business,” Dream looks back at Karl, “I know we don’t have your stuff here, but I’ll bet Bad has a few books lying around that might be helpful. All we can do is search until morning when a library opens.”

“Or we could go back to sleep.” George offers, “Until morning.”

“As bad as I want to do that, I don’t think I’ll be getting much sleep,” Karl sighs. “Research it is.”

“We’ll figure it out, Karl.” Quackity squeezes his knee. “Just stay calm, okay?”

“Okay.” Karl swallows, looking around the room at the others. Each of them smile, though George also sticks his tongue out. “Okay.” He repeats, feeling a little better.

“Dibs on Bad’s office,” George says, standing up, and Karl follows suit, to a loud “*Unfair!*” and a louder, “You’re not rifling through my dad’s office, George!” from Quackity and Sapnap, respectively.

At least he has them with him, he thinks, amused.

Karl wakes up with a crick in his neck and the sound of incessant pounding at the front door.

Quackity lets out a mumble of syllables that might be “What the fuck?” but are far too cloaked in sleep to form anything intelligible. To his left, though, Sapnap jerks up, sleep chased from his eyes as he registers the sound. They’re all splayed over the counter, the meager collection of books they’d managed to find open around them, ultimately useless. One book falls to the floor as Karl flails into a sitting position, a soft *thunk* that makes Quackity wince.

There is a rumble and the clattering of feet as Dream, then George, trip and tumble their way out of the office. There is a sheet of paper stuck to George’s cheek, and Dream’s hair is haphazard and there is still someone banging at the fucking door.

“Who the hell is knocking at -” George looks toward the large grandfather clock in the corner of the living room. “Eleven-fourty-seven in the fucking morning?”

“*Helloooooo?*” A very familiar voice calls out, “Anyone fucking alive in there?”

“Gods fucking above,” Sapnap says.

“Nope,” Karl says, primly, despite the anxiousness that floods through him all at once, “Just Tommy.”

“Don’t let them in,” Sapnap says sharply as George continues toward the door.

“I’m *not*, I’m not an idiot. I’ll tell them to piss off,” George scoffs, “Diplomatically.”

“Wait,” Karl says, standing. He doesn’t even know why at first. Does he want these people to know? He doesn’t *know* Tommy and Wilbur and the rest, not like the others do - and he isn’t exactly fond of any of them. They might not understand.

Sapnap’s instincts are usually right and right now his instincts are telling them to keep these people out of it. But, not for the first time, the thought occurs to him; they’re going to need all the help they can get.

“They could help.” He says.

Silence meets the words.

“I don’t think so.” Sapnap says tightly.

“He’s right,” Dream argues, “They’ve traveled all over the world. These guys might be useless to us, but Phil...he’s seen, like, everything there is to see. He’s a walking library all on his own.”

Sapnap jerks his head in a sharp shake and Karl can see the response forming, his shoulders set, but Dream motions at Karl and Sapnap looks at him, instead. He catches Karl’s eyes, and stops. Karl watches him compose himself, take a step forward, hand outstretched.

“Karl,” He says, “Your teeth, dude,”

“I know,” Karl says, trying for cheerful, “They do seem to be the elephant in the room.”

“No, they’re,” Sapnap swallows, “They’re smaller. Than last night, I mean.”

“What?” Karl’s hands fly up to his mouth, and Quackity scrambles to his feet properly, coming around to examine them for himself. Sure enough, even with clumsy and indelicate fingers, Karl can tell; they’re not the same fangs that obscured his speech and marred his mouth. His finger scrapes a tip and he tastes copper. Still sharp then. But no longer protruding, no longer as... fearsome. They don’t even rip into his cheeks when he closes his mouth.

“Your eyes are clearer,” Quackity says, with a small, reassuring smile, “Still not... still not back to normal, not completely, but better. They’re like...almost silver, but brighter? I can see your irises again. I dunno.”

“Better,” Karl says, trying to lift his tone from the hole he had dug it into last night, “Better, guys, see? Maybe it’ll just... go away on its own. A weird one-time thing.”

George is the one to shake his head, though the others make similar motions of disagreement, “If it happened once, it can happen again. We can’t...we can’t ignore this, Karl.”

“I know,” Karl sighs, “I wish we could, though.”

When Karl finds whoever set this curse, he's going to shake their hand and then gut them.

The door *shakes* with the force of the fist that pounds on it at that moment.

"We can *hear* you in there, dickheads!" Tommy shouts, "Come on, Techno is *brooding* because you haven't shown up to discuss *strategy*, and Puffy thinks you stood her up!"

"I wish we could fucking ignore that," Sapnap says, perhaps a touch too vicious. Still, this is his home, *his people*, and Karl knows he didn't miss the way Quackity had flinched at Techno's name. He doesn't blame Sapnap for the aggression. If things weren't quite as they are, he'd find it hot, even.

Okay, fine, yes, he still finds it a little hot. A lot hot.

"Are we inviting them in or not?" George asks, gaze flicking between all of them. He's at the door now, and flicks the cap off the peephole to look out. "It's Tommy, Tubbo and Wilbur, by the way. No, wait, Ranboo's behind them. Prime, do they go everywhere in groups? They're like a flock of geese, for fuck's sake."

"Gaggle." Karl corrects needlessly.

"Whatever the fuck," Sapnap speaks over his comment, "We wouldn't need all of them. Phil's the real expert. We don't need all of them, dude."

"And how do you think we get to Phil, Sap?" Quackity says, "Tommy, Tubbo, Ranboo... they're good kids. If we ask them to keep this quiet, they will. They'll help."

Karl watches as Sapnap's jaw tenses and untenses, the words unsaid but loud enough to drown out the room all the same. He looks like he's about to pursue the argument; the one unfortunately Wilbur-and-Techno-shaped, but Quackity doesn't back down. He reaches for Karl's hand and grips it tight, as if to ground himself. This is a fight Quackity is willing to take on just to help Karl, and Karl can't let him do it alone.

"Sapnap."

Sapnap turns, and Karl makes sure to take his hand as well. He holds on tight to both his boys.

"I know you're protecting us," He says softly, "And we trust you. But we need you to trust us on this."

"I trust you. I don't trust *them*," Sapnap grumbles, and Karl chuckles quietly.

"You don't have to trust them. Just us. Let's see if they can be useful. If they aren't, we can toss them right out."

"You're scared. I can smell it." Sapnap retorts. His nostrils flare. No doubt, they're all stinking the room up.

“Yeah, of course I’m fucking scared, Sapnap. I’m sleepwalking and my eyes look like a dead person’s and two of my teeth have turned into sharp little fangs.” Karl says, and Sapnap grows steadily more tense as he speaks. “*But* I’m not as scared as I was.” Karl continues, conscious of the people waiting outside. “Because I know you’ll protect me. Protect us. Okay? They aren’t a threat. You won’t let them be.”

“I trust you,” Sapnap finally relents. “And I trust you, Q. If you think they’ll help, we’ll...negotiate.”

Karl nods, giving both Quackity and Sapnap’s hands a tight squeeze. “Thank you. George?”

George hesitates, obviously still siding with Sapnap’s instincts from the frown on his face, but he reaches out and unlatches the door.

Karl doesn’t see them as they enter, because of the way that both Quackity and Sapnap instinctively stand in front of him, but at least three of the four pushing their way into the apartment are much taller than them and Karl doubts it will do much to hide him. He appreciates the thought, nonetheless.

Tommy grins down at George with an only slightly disgruntled, “Gogy!”; Tubbo leans against the doorframe and massages his knees with a complaint of, “We were out there *ages*, my legs hurt, didn’t you hear us, big man?”

Ranboo has to duck his head to come in, and appears to be the first person to realize that not everything is as it seems. Wilbur enters last, and his gaze immediately finds Quackity. Karl can’t help but bristle, knowing that Sapnap is doing the same, but Quackity stands determinedly in front of Karl, shielding him.

“We heard you,” George says, shortly, “We just have other things to be doing besides answering the door to annoying children.”

Karl is thankful that Dream anticipates the way that Tommy appears to be about to explode into characteristic yelling, and cuts him off at the pass.

“We need your help.”

“As an alarm clock, clearly,” Wilbur drawls, “We’re not getting you breakfast everyday, if that’s what you’re fishing for.”

“Something a little more serious than that, Wilbur,” Sapnap grits out. Wilbur, to his credit, doesn’t bat an eyelash at Sapnap’s tone. He leans back on his heels. Next to him, Ranboo twists his hands anxiously. Tommy frowns, finally picking up on the tension in the air.

“What’s going on?” He asks.

“Is it something to do with how Karl is hiding?” Tubbo continues.

“I’m not hiding!” Karl says, indignant.

“Sure, you’re not,” Tubbo replies, “I can see right through you, dude. Not literally, but, you know.”

“It’s just...difficult.” Karl says, carefully, “It’s a pretty serious situation we have going on here. Delicate, even.”

“Okay,” Tommy says, uncharacteristically serious, and hoists himself onto one of the kitchen counters, legs swinging, “Tell us what’s wrong, then.”

Quackity squeezes Karl’s hand. Sapnap doesn’t move.

“Guys,” Karl says, swallowing, “They have to see at some point. We *need* them to see.”

“Does it help if we promise not to hurt any of you?” Wilbur asks.

“Not that we would, except, you know, in an arena,” Tommy adds.

“Like you *could*,” Sapnap snaps.

“Sapnap,” Karl frowns, “It’s okay. I’m okay.”

He tugs on Sapnap’s hand. It takes a moment, Sapnap stiff and unyielding, but in the end, he turns, meeting Karl’s eyes. Karl nods.

With a sigh, Sapnap steps away. Karl tries to keep his eyes on Sapnap, his concentration on the feeling of Quackity’s hand in his. But he doesn’t miss the way that Tommy and Tubbo’s eyes widen in strange unison, how Ranboo reaches into his backpack and pulls out a book and begins flicking through it; how Wilbur leans forward with distinct *interest*, finally looking away from Quackity.

“Well,” Wilbur says, “That’s certainly...”

“So fucking cool!” Tommy says, Tubbo nodding along enthusiastically, “Dude, why don’t I ever get cool mutations?”

“Guys,” Dream starts firmly, but Tubbo is already off.

“God, late hybrid traits are so *rare*, and we only saw you yesterday, Karl, and they’ve already grown? When did you notice them? How fast is their rate of growth, do you reckon?”

“Tubbo -” George tries where Dream has failed, but doesn’t make any headway before Tubbo continues.

“What else can you do; they look pretty sharp, fangs are normally seen with claws or horns or - Tails! Do you think you’ll grow a tail?”

“Tubbo!” Wilbur says, sharp, and Tubbo falls silent. Karl winces, and is glad when Wilbur adds, contrite, “Sorry, that wasn’t supposed to be so harsh. But I don’t think this is something these guys are particularly excited about,” He makes eye contact with Karl, and Karl barely suppresses a shiver at Wilbur’s knowing, searching gaze. “Is it, Mister Jacobs?”

“It happened overnight.” Karl says instead of answering, “I woke up, and my mouth hurt, and when I looked in the mirror, I was... like this. And then when you guys woke us up, they had... shrunk. A bit.”

Ranboo pauses from where he had been scribbling in his book, and frowns. “That’s not... Even with late hybrid traits, that’s weird. They pop up, but they don’t go away.”

“That’s because it’s *not* late hybrid traits,” George says, and Karl can hear the eye roll even as he can see it, as if Karl hadn’t been the one arguing against that idea last night while everyone else was sure he was part hoglin, “Don’t you think we would have figured that one out already?”

“Well, you never know with you, Gogy,” Tommy says, but his joke falls a bit flat when even Dream, who by far has the most patience for his antics, doesn’t respond.

“We don’t know what this is,” Dream says instead, “Even Karl doesn’t know what this is, and he’s our resident expert.”

“And you think we do?” Wilbur says, with a raised eyebrow.

“Of course not,” Quackity replies, staring him down. His tone says he doesn’t expect Wilbur to know anything of particular worth at all. Karl loves every part of Quackity, always will, but he feels so much fondness for this determined, straight-backed Quackity, facing the ghosts of his past head on, that his heart might just burst. “But your dad will.”

“Not sure about *will*,” Wilbur folds his arms, “But we’ll see what we can do, if you want. Phil loves a good mystery.”

“So, that’s all you needed help with? You could have just come down to ask and saved us the trip. What are we waiting for?” Tommy jumps off the counter. Karl appreciates the fact that this kid can find enthusiasm in everything, “Phil knows everything! I’m sure he’ll know about your weird teeth thing.”

“And the eyes,” Tubbo says, following him, “Don’t forget the eyes.”

“Who could forget the eyes,” Ranboo mutters and then covers his mouth when Karl glares at him.

“He’ll know,” Tommy repeats, “He’s been alive *forever*. He’s seen this before, I know it.”

“I’m sorry, mate,” Phil says, shaking his head. Karl had known this was going to happen from the moment his brow had furrowed when Karl lowered his hood, and the way that he sat down heavily in his chair only made it that much more obvious, “I really am, but... I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

“You’re kidding,” George says, flatly.

“Unfortunately, I’m not kidding.” Phil shrugs, looks apologetic enough that Karl believes him, “I wish I was. I’ve seen a lot of hybrids over the years, but if you’re insisting you’re not

a hybrid -”

“I’m not!”

“I don't think you are, either.” Phil puts his hands up. At least he looks genuinely down when he continues, “Then there isn’t much else I can offer you. If it's a curse, it's not one I know. I can point you in the direction of a few good libraries, I think the old archivist for the Antarctic Empire is somewhere in Pandora with his husband, I can put you in contact with him -”

“That’s all?” Sapnap frowns, “You’re sure?”

“That’s all.” Phil confirms.

“Dad,” Tommy interrupts, “Phil, surely we can ask -” Wilbur elbows him in the side, and he yelps, stomping on Wilbur's foot hard enough that Wilbur buckles, “Hey! It was just a suggestion, Wil, no need to get *testy* with me!”

“Don't just go about, offering -” Wilbur starts hotly but his father clears his throat and he quietens with a disgruntled sniff.

“Boys,” Phil sighs, long-suffering. “If you're going to act like children, you can join Tubbo and Ranboo outside. Behave, please.”

“Yes, Phil.” They both mutter in unison, mirroring each other as they glare down at their feet.

Sometimes, it's easy for Karl to forget why he hates them a little bit, or a *lot* bit in Wilbur's case. They're such an odd little pack of a family, much like Karl's own. He feels George stifle a giggle where he's pressed right along Karl's side and is reminded of how closely packed they all are.

The five of them and Tommy and Wilbur and Phil have sequestered themselves within the small cabin that had been set aside for Phil and his family by Puffy. It looks exactly like what Karl might have imagined their shared space, had he cared to do so prior to this moment; hammocks slung from the ceiling, a guitar propped up against a wall alongside a half-built redstone contraption Karl would find interesting in other circumstances.

It's also stuffed with three large trunks that take up a hefty portion of the floor, and Karl spies a rucksack stuffed to bursting in one of the hammocks. A trip to Pandora might be a handful of weeks by sea but Karl would hazard that they've packed much more than even a family the size of the Minecrafts would need for a casual journey to Pandora for a friendly spar that had already been on hold for two years.

“Who could you ask?” Dream leans forward on Karl's other side, hands clasped calmly on the table between them and Phil.

“Someone.” Phil sits back. “Not to...downplay the seriousness of your situation, but the individual that Tommy is suggesting we talk to is a very busy woman. She doesn't have time to spare for something like this.”

"We could offer a trade?" George bargains. "I may not be a prince anymore, but a lot of people owe me more favors than I can count. Surely *some* of those favors might appeal to someone enough that they'd hear a simple question."

"She doesn't need favors," Phil laughs, not unkindly, "And this is not a simple question, though I'm sure she'd appreciate the offer, Your Majesty."

"It's just George." George smiles back, more baring his teeth than actually smiling. "Maybe you missed the part where I said I wasn't a prince anymore. Certainly, I'm not *Your Majesty*."

Karl elbows him in the ribs, but Phil just cackles, nodding.

"Sorry, sorry. Old habits die hard for men like me. We fall into rhythms when talking to certain types."

"There are no men like you." Quackity puts a hand on Karl's shoulder, squeezing. "That's why we came to you. Please, if there's even a chance that this person might know something..."

Karl sees Wilbur roll his eyes from the corner of his vision. Instead of responding, he just puts his hand over Quackity's and squeezes tight. Even in the midst of this conversation, he's as impressed and awed by his fiancée as he's ever been. For Karl, Quackity is willingly speaking to Wilbur and Phil and had risked facing Technoblade, though the man in question had luckily ended up being on a short shopping trip with Puffy and her first mate.

Karl practically feels Sapnap vibrating behind him, holding himself in place, stationed as best he can to see every person in the room at once. The only reason he isn't at Karl's side is because the two people he trusts most are bracketing him in, leaving Sapnap to put himself at his back and between Wilbur and Quackity, with an eye on the door behind them. He, too, is pushing himself out of his comfort zone to help and accommodate Karl, making sure he is safe.

And Dream and George - after everything, when George only wants to pretend all of these people don't exist and Dream is on his not-mom's ship for the first time since he was a child and it isn't at all to do with her or their relationship, but *Karl*...

Karl is so lucky. Lucky enough that, though he despises him, he doesn't begrudge Wilbur his jealousy. Karl would be sad, too, if he was such a loser.

"We *are* going to visit her. She's somewhere...a little out of reach for most people." Phil says carefully, confirming Karl's previous trail of thought. "I can ask her about this, but we won't be back for quite a while. Weeks, probably. You'd have better luck with the libraries here."

"With all due respect, Phil," Karl says, beginning to trace a protective sigil into Quackity's hand to keep himself calm, "I'm a librarian. I *have* a library. I have more rare books and histories than I can say, and I know more stories than have been committed to paper, and I have no idea what's happening to me! We don't need a library, we need...something else."

"You didn't see him, Philza," Dream says, insistent, "It's not just the fangs and the eyes. We're worried about Karl's our friend, we don't care if he turns purple! It was like he was *gone*. He didn't recognise us when we tried to wake him up. Where is this person? Maybe we can go -"

"No. This is as much as I can help, mate," Phil says, almost infuriatingly calm in response to Dream's outburst, "I can't help with what I don't know, but she isn't meant for...the likes of you, as kindly as I can mean that."

A different, distant voice cuts between Dream and whatever argument he'd had ready to throw back at Phil.

"Dream?"

"In here, Captain!" Tubbo says from outside.

George barely has time to get out, "Shit, that's Puffy." before the door opens.

The cabin is cramped and small - the door opens fast, slamming into Sapnap, who stumbles against the wall with a yelp, accidentally pulling Quackity with him. Despite George attempting to bodily tackle Karl to the floor to save him from view, Dream is on his other side and long used to being tackled by someone much heavier than the two of them, so he barely budes at all, frozen as he is by the voice.

Despite George's best efforts, Karl is unfortunately visible when Puffy walks in, but she only seems to care about one person in particular.

"Oh." Puffy says as her eyes fall on Dream. "You came."

"I -" Dream hesitates. "Sorry we were so late."

"It's okay," She smiles, small and awkward, "Time is funny, you know, it passes strangely, so," her eyes trail down Dream's arm to where George and Karl are an unmoving pile of limbs. Her eyes, gold like sunbeams reflecting on a mist, find Karl's and she trails off.

Karl smiles, trying to be friendly, but, as their eyes meet, a jolt so powerful it physically moves his body overcomes him. It's recognition - stronger than it had hit him yesterday. He'd spent hours attempting to figure out where he'd seen Puffy before, but now he feels like maybe it hadn't been that he'd seen her before and more that he'd always known her. Part of her, at least. Two strangers with a connection.

Karl looks at her and it's almost as if he sees the same silver of his own eyes reflecting back at him. Metaphorically.

"Holy shit." She says, hand slapping against and then clutching at the door frame, the other palm laying over her heart, "You're a - what? But you're - why are you waking up *now*?"

"Waking up?" Dream repeats, bewildered.

"What," George says, low and more dangerous than Karl has ever heard him, "are you talking about, Puffy?"

Karl swallows. Neither he nor Puffy take their eyes off each other. Sapnap shoves the door out of the way and drags himself and Quackity out from behind it, staring between the two of them.

"You're like me," Karl says, and he barely understands what he's saying but he knows it's true. "You know what's happening to me. What this is."

"I -" Puffy presses her tongue to her cheek. "Maybe."

"*Maybe?*"

"I wish I didn't!" Puffy huffs. "I'd hoped to be done with the court and all of its fuckery. Yet, here it is, sitting on my own damn ship! How did you even get here?"

"Court?" Sapnap asks, "Kinoko's court? Why would the whole court come after *Karl*, of all of us!?"

"Tommy," Phil says, standing quickly, "Wil, go help your brothers with the supplies."

"Phil -"

"Go!" Phil says dismissively, with all the strength of an emperor, "Shut the door as you leave. I think that whatever Puffy has to say is best kept private."

Tommy deems it wise to keep his mouth shut at his father's stern tone, but he still throws him a scowl over his shoulder as Wilbur leads him towards the door. They step around Puffy, still far too pale even as she shifts out of their way, crossing her arm tight in front of her chest, only for Wilbur to push Tommy through and latch the door from the inside.

"Wil," Phil says, warningly.

"Phil," Wilbur tilts his chin up, daring his father. Meeting the bearings of an emperor with those of a prince. "If this is about the *Courts*, I have a right to hear as much as any. *You* know that, of all people."

"This isn't about *our* Court, mate."

"Then it's even more important that I hear it."

Karl couldn't care less for the little power struggle going on in the tiny cabin, he just wants to *know*.

"Right now, I don't give a shit about privacy," He snaps, turning his attention back to Puffy. "Can someone *please* tell me what the fuck is happening to me and stop talking over our fucking heads?"

Puffy looks between them all, her gaze lingering between Phil and Dream and finally, Karl.

“So you don’t know? She checks. Karl stares at her, hoping that he doesn’t have to, once again, admit to the blank spot in his knowledge. Whatever this is, he hasn’t even heard stories about it and that is the scariest part of all.

"Karl," She says carefully, his silence speaking for itself, "Have you ever heard of a stray?"

"Like...a dog?" Quackity asks, "because that's a little fucking rude, just as a note."

“No,” Puffy shakes her head, “As in your...ancestry, in a way, I guess. Sapnap is a fire demon, Phil is an avian and you... you’re a stray. Like I am. Was.”

“A stray?” Dream says at the same time that Karl finds enough voice to say, “But I’m not a hybrid!”

“I never said hybrid, kiddo, listen to me.” Puffy snaps him back to attention. “Strays aren’t hybrids. They’re different. There’s a price that comes with this heritage that hybrids don’t have to pay. You feel it, don’t you? The changes. The tug in you?” She looks him over, critical. “You know what I’m talking about.”

“...yes.” He admits. It tastes like blood.

“Your roots. They’re calling you home.”

Sapnap draws his shoulders up, hackles figuratively raised, Quackity firmly tucked behind him now that Wilbur is at Puffy’s side.

“They?” Sapnap grits out, “Who the fuck are *they*?”

“The Court.” Puffy’s eyes go distant as she reaches back, gathers her hair in a loose hold and begins to tie it up as she talks. Karl recognizes the anxious tactic for what it is, something to do with her hands, but he wants to snap at her to focus and just tell him what he needs to know. Instead, he turns in his seat to face her fully, George and Dream quickly doing the same.

“Who’s Court?” he prompts, drawing her attention to him. She lets her hands fall, hair now pulled back from her face, making her look just a bit younger. “I’ve pissed off a few nobles in my time, but the only court I’ve ever had dealings with is George’s.”

“No Court of this world. Strays like us,” she starts slowly, looking at Karl with a serious pinch to her lips. “We hail from the Court of the Inbetween.”

Karl isn’t so enthralled by Puffy that he doesn’t notice how Wilbur straightens, and he sees Phil draw his wings in, tight and close to his back. He doesn’t believe they’d been lying before, so something in Puffy’s speech has evidently sparked their memory where none of the earlier explanations had. Hm. Interesting.

“Puffy, please,” Dream asks, hands fisting together in his lap nervously, “Stop skirting around this. None of us have any idea what you’re talking about.”

“I was pretty much born on the sea,” Puffy starts, and Karl feels like he is being extremely generous in letting her continue before he starts to tear his hair out from frustration, “I took to it like a fish. The ocean has always been where I belong. But, when I was seventeen, that’s when I... began to change. I wasn’t a captain then, and my crew had no trouble getting rid of some strange hybrid that none of them had ever seen before. I didn’t know what was going on, what was happening to me. My only hope was to follow my instincts.”

He feels an arm around his back and knows without looking that George is reaching behind him, grabbing the back of Dream’s shirt.

“I’m a sailor at heart.” Puffy continues, voice soft and lulling like the waves, “I knew wanderlust, the urge to sail toward the sun and not look back. This was more than that. More than an urge. It was a *pull*. I tried to ignore it, tried to learn to live with the changes. My eyes turned silver. My teeth grew. My skin began to gray. In the end, I could barely stand it. I gave in and followed the pull, and I found my way home.”

The way she says *home* is bitter; it curls to sour ashes in her mouth and seems to stain the room with it.

“I don’t... I don’t remember a lot of it. I was operating mostly on instinct at that point, going as fast as I could before the changes became irreversible. I’m glad I don’t remember, honestly. It’s a fucking awful place, the Nether -”

Dream blanches, face paling, “You’ve been to the Nether?”

“Unfortunately,” Puffy says, “It’s where I went, after all. Where my roots are. I never thought I’d end up in the realm of life, but I did.”

“How...” Dream swallows thickly. Karl, despite his own stress, can’t help but rest a comforting hand on Dream’s knee. “Did you know? That Kinoko’s throne was connected?”

“Not at first.” Puffy shakes her head. “But I sensed it, eventually. I don’t know who powered the throne, which of the Empress’ Court had their hands in your family’s power, George, but it was grating, being around it after leaving her service.”

“The throne is gone now.” George says slowly. “You’re saying that it wasn’t the only way to access the Nether?”

“That hellscape existed for millennia before the throne, and it’ll exist for millennia after.” Puffy shakes her head, “And so will the Court. The Inbetween, it isn’t finite. It’s indefinite, just like its sister-court. As the Goddess of Death rules the Other Side and presides over the End, the Blaze Empress rules the Inbetween and has dominion over the Nether. Death and life, a circle.”

She looks haunted as she speaks, shadows under her eyes as they grow distant again, remembering.

Karl would be sympathetic, if he wasn’t so aware of the teeth in his mouth, and the stiffness of Dream at his side, the worry on Sappap’s face.

“Okay.” Quackity says slowly. “Okay. So what? Karl is...a stray, fine. But you’re a stray, too, and you look fine. Why is he changing? Does it have to do with the Nether?”

“The Inbetween is in the Nether,” Puffy nods, “And it’s where you’re being called. It’s in our nature. The magic that saved us calls us to pay our debt. But you’re...” she looks him over, narrowing her eyes as she focuses in, “You’re so much older than usual.”

“I’m not even twenty-five!”

“Usually,” Puffy waves Karl off, much to his chagrin, “If you’re going to wake up, it will be when you reach adulthood. That’s when the magic can recognize whether you’re worth it or not. You, though...you’re far past that age.”

“Now, I wouldn’t say *far*,” Karl protests again, feeling his pride stinging. Does he look old? How old does she think he is? Hello? He’s barely into his mid-twenties? And - “Hey! What do you mean, *worth* it!?”

“If I can,” Phil interjects, “My knowledge on the Inbetween is limited. My allegiance is to the Other Side and my queen. I’ve never come across one of the Empress’ strays before. I’m sorry I didn’t recognize it sooner.”

“I really am not loving the whole *stray* thing,” Quackity cuts in, crossing his arms. “You’re making him sound like he’s some sort of left-behind pet. What the fuck is a *stray*!?”

“Strays are how the Inbetween repopulates.” Wilbur replies, voice dragging and casual. “The Courts have been barred from this dimension, the Overworld, for a long, long time. To be Allay or Vex is to be immortal, but immortal is not invulnerable. They die, as the throne showed us. So the Courts populate. The Other Side has a more dignified approach - the queen meets those she deems appropriate upon their passing and offers them a place in her Court. The Empress is another story.”

“What the fuck is an Allay?” Sapnap touches his head, “What the absolute fuck? A Vex?”

“They’re the members of the Courts.” Wilbur sighs, like Sapnap is particularly slow.

“They’re old stories.” Karl frowns. “Barely anyone tells those stories anymore. They’ve been replaced by Prime or the island pantheon.”

“Well, I can’t speak for Prime, but *we* are real.” Wilbur flashes a smile. “Very much so.”

“I don’t remember dying, though.” Karl finds himself looking at Quackity as if for confirmation, who shakes his head as Karl continues, “I definitely think I’d remember dying.”

“You didn’t die. You’re a stray,” Wilbur sighs and Quackity makes an aggravated noise.

“Get *on* with it, Wilbur.” He snaps. It’s the first time Karl thinks he’s addressed Wilbur at all.

Wilbur must notice, too, because he looks at Quackity and, though he doesn’t smile, he might as well for how his eyes light up.

“The Empress’ magic seeks out weak and dying new-borns, those that wouldn’t otherwise make it.” Wilbur says bluntly. “The magic bolsters them, makes them strong enough to survive. And when they grow up and reach maturity, the magic weighs whether they’re worth it or not. If they are, it wakes up and calls them home to join the Court.”

“Fucking hell, Wilbur!” Phil admonishes, “What an explanation.”

“It’s better than dancing around it!” Wilbur retorts, but Karl is no longer listening. He feels sick. The whole room is spinning, in a way that has nothing to do with the fact that the boat is gently listing from side to side under them. The bile crawls up his throat; some of it copper, some of it thick and acrid, all of it uneasy and none of it good.

“Changelings,” He says, hollow, “The stories call them changelings.”

He looks up to Quackity and Sapnap, both staring at him with twin expressions of shock.

“There’s loads of old stories where Vex and Allay take children, replace them with one of their own. The parents raise a monster, and their own child is long gone. Lost, or dead, or -” He swallows down a hitching sort of noise, “They say all stories come from somewhere.”

“Not exactly.” Puffy sniffs. “We weren’t replaced. We’re just kept from death. It’s a gift from the Empress, though not one without cost.”

“It’s not a pretty truth.” Phil says evenly.

“At least it’s a truth,” George says, “Better than not knowing. We can work with this, Karl.”

“But Puffy,” Dream says, diverting from whatever Phil had been about to reply, “You don’t have the teeth or...or the eyes. You never have. What did you do? How did you escape the Nether?”

Puffy sighs, only a little shaky. “I followed the call. I went home. The price you pay for being given a chance at life is becoming a part of the Court, if you’re called. But you can say no. You can make a deal, repay the Court for the magic it used to save you, and you can leave. That’s what I did. I made a deal.”

“A deal?” Dream’s voice goes soft, searching. “What kind of deal?”

“Becoming a Vex isn’t...” Puffy finally looks at Dream again and all of her fidgeting goes away. “It isn’t for me. There were others who said yes. There’s power in joining her Court; immortality, magic. But there’s no sea or ocean in the Nether. It’s just heat. Turns out the birthplace of life is hell. I couldn’t stay there; but the transformation that takes hold if you don’t pay the price - it’s. It’s worse than death. I saw it happen, just once, to a stray that showed up after me. He wouldn’t make a deal, but he wouldn’t join the Court. So he turned into...*something*. Some monster. And he was put in a cage like a bird and taken away.”

“So you made the deal. You paid the Court back.” Dream clarifies, voice wavering. Karl has a feeling that he is no longer fishing for information on the Court.

“I made a trade.” Puffy agrees. “I didn’t want to become a Vex. My life was just starting; I was out on the ocean. I was going to make a crew, get a ship. Become a captain. What did a home mean to me, when I had the whole ocean? So that’s what I traded. I left the Empress’ service with her blessing by offering an equitable trade.”

“*What* did you trade?” Dream demands, standing up, “Just a home? You just traded a home?”

“Essentially, yes. I gave her my ability to build a home for myself, a permanent place to exist. I have to stay on the move now. If I push it, I can stick around the same place for a few years. If I travel often, I can come back to a place for a while between trips, but if I stay for too long, my heart starts to pull me to another. You might say I’m in a constant state of wanderlust.”

“You can’t stay in one place.” Dream’s lip trembles before he bites it hard and nods. “Okay. That makes sense. It must have been...really hard, to be in Kinoko, after that. The castle. You were there for...for a long time. Five years.”

“It wasn’t the best.” Puffy admits. “But I wanted to get you settled in before I left. And now, look.” She looks around at the cabin, face finally breaking. She smiles. “I’m back on the ship. The only home I need. In the end, I got off lightly. My deal just made it possible for me to really do what I love. It doesn’t have to be awful, Karl. You can live your life without regret or losing what matters to you.” Her eyes find Karl before returning to the wood of her ship, which she lays a loving hand on as she speaks. “You just have to be smart about it, when you make your deal. If you don’t want to become a Vex, that is. Or a monster, I guess.”

Dream doesn’t move, but Karl is familiar enough with him to know the difference between still and frozen. Karl squeezes his knee again, his heart aching for him.

Puffy’s attention is still on the ship, but Wilbur and Phil are still watching, eyes moving between the five of them. Karl doesn’t want either of them to see whatever Dream is feeling. He doesn’t want any of these strangers to have access to Dream when he’s hurting, or *Karl* while he’s processing.

“How do we get to the Nether?” He asks, standing up. George slides into the spot he vacated and Karl opens his arms, letting his cloak hide Dream from view as he gesticulates into the air madly. “Is that what I need to do? Go talk to her?”

“Yes.” Puffy drops her hand back to her side, “You have to have an audience with the Empress. If you follow the pull, it’ll lead you home.”

“Follow the pull.” Karl frowns. “I don’t know what that means. It’s just pulling me *away*.”

“And it will continue to do so.” She shrugs, vaguely sympathetic, “Until you aren’t *away* anymore. My way was a portal in the Greater SMP, where I’d been exploring. Not too far from where I found Dream, actually.”

Dream makes an acknowledging noise behind Karl, but Karl can hear how it shakes, even if no one else would have been able to pick it up. He puts his hands on his hips, letting the folds of his cloak continue to hide Dream and George from the rest of the cabin. Quackity comes to

Karl's side as she talks, Sapnap hot on his heels, and Sapnap sits on the bench, shifting Dream farther behind Karl.

The last few days have felt a bit like a game of curtains, Karl bodily blocking one person or another. Maybe Karl should bargain for the power to make annoying people disappear, since he's got to have some sort of wordplay with an immortal, all-powerful Empress and everything.

"Portal?" George says to himself and Karl glances over his shoulder at him, only for George to shake his head. Not for those in the room, then. Karl will ask later.

"It sounds like there's a lot to process." Phil says into the empty air. "A lot to...think about. Why don't you boys head back to where you're staying and take some time. I'm sure you have questions that you don't know how to ask just yet. Rest, think. Join us for dinner tonight. You can ask then."

"Dinner sounds lovely." Karl agrees. The cabin seems so fucking small. Wilbur stands at the door, Puffy not too far from him. Phil is still mostly behind them, not a threat but with far too good a view of whatever is happening behind Karl's cloak. It's time for them to break.

Karl has to think. Karl has to plan. By the gods, Karl has to meditate.

At least it isn't a curse. Not by someone who managed to get through his defenses, at least.

"Dinner it is." Puffy claps, though it's soft. "I'll send Foolish to escort you tonight. We'll have it on the ship. I have a chef, she's amazing."

"Yeah." Karl nods. "That sounds good."

"Techno can walk you back." Phil offers, but Karl shakes his head before he's even finished the name.

"We can find our way," he says, flashing him a friendly grin, "You've got your hands full, with the whole brood about, I'll bet. Keep your right hand man."

Phil smiles slightly, eyes understanding.

"Allow me to get the door," Wilbur says, hand on the handle. He twists, pulls, and three bodies fall through the newly made hole, landing on top of each other in a large, groaning pile.

"I *told* you to *move*," Tubbo says from the bottom of the pile.

"Tommy *wouldn't!*" Ranboo complains.

Tommy just blinks up at them all from on top of his brothers, a charming, crooked smile held firmly in place.

"Lovely seeing you all here," he clears his throat, "Come often?"

“I tried to stop them.” Techno says from outside the room, “You know how they are. Curious cats.”

“Who’re about to meet a fitting end if they don’t scoot,” Phil warns, standing, and all three of them scramble up with loud goodbyes of “*See you for dinner*,” “*Later*,” and “*Bye, guys!*”

“We’re leaving now.” Sapnap stands up, and he looks conflicted. Karl knows it’s because he only has two hands and he wants to grab all of them. Carefully, Karl takes his hand and folds it between both of his.

“We’re leaving now.” He repeats, and pulls Sapnap out of the cabin. He knows it works like a chain without needing to look; that’s sort of just how the five of them travel at times. Someone is always grabbing someone else. If Phil’s children were a gaggle of geese, what did that make them?

He’s proven correct when he finally stops, once they’ve crossed the gangplank and are back on the dock and he has all four friends with him and no additions.

“We need to go home.” George strides past him, Dream’s hand firmly in his and Quackity’s shirt sleeve pinched between a few fingers of the other, a brisk expression on his face. Karl doesn’t argue, he and Sapnap taking up the rear.

“Are you okay?” Sapnap asks as they leave the docks, his worry plain to see.

“No.” Karl says honestly, because he’s avoiding the lying thing. “Let’s go home.”

“I’d love to.” Sapnap drops his voice, and Karl finds himself agreeing with him. What he’d give to be back at the mansion.

They go to the apartment and file through the door, kicking off shoes as they cross the threshold. Dream goes to the couch without a word, cloak wrapped tight around him. Karl collapses into the chair and pulls Sapnap into his lap without preamble, wrapping him up in his arms and shoving his face into Sapnap’s warm neck. Sapnap lets him without a fight, holding his hands where they cross on his belly.

George and Quackity appear a few minutes later with a tray of steaming mugs that sit on the table and go untouched for a long few minutes.

“That was fucked up,” Karl decides to break the quiet.

“Every part of it,” Sapnap agrees.

“We got what we wanted. Needed.” Quackity leans forward and picks up one of the mugs, pulling it to his face and just breathing in the steam evenly. “It wasn’t good news, but it was...news.”

“We know what we need to do.” George swallows. “Find a portal. Go to the Nether.”

“No.” Dream shuts him down. “We’re not going to the Nether.”

“Yeah,” Karl frowns, “It’s too dangerous. I can do it.”

“*You’re* not going to the Nether!”

“I don’t *want* to!” Karl pitches his voice into a loud whine, hoping that if he just...sounds like he’s joking about it, then a joke will end up being all that it is. “That place sounds fucking awful, Dream, I’ll be real honest! But if Puffy says -”

“Puffy doesn’t know everything!” Dream snaps. “She doesn’t know - she doesn’t. She wasn’t trapped there. She went there on purpose, she went to the Inbetween, not - not just -”

“Hey,” George says, putting a hand on Dream’s shoulder.

As if George had put a pin in him, Dream deflates, shoulders curling in, head dropping.

“None of you should go there. None of us.”

“We shouldn’t.” Karl swallows, leaning his temple on Sapnap’s head. “But I have to. I won’t ask any of you to come with me, but apparently I’m going to keep...changing, if I don’t go talk to her, so...”

“Don’t be an idiot.” Sapnap scoffs. “I’m going with you.”

“Me, too.” Quackity takes a careful drink from his mug. “Not up for debate.”

“I’m going.” George rolls his eyes, “Of course I am. But, hey,” George turns to look at Dream. “You don’t have to. None of us would blame you, if you needed to stay in the - Overworld, or whatever stupid little name they want to call it.”

“You’re not going in there without me.” Dream covers George’s hand with his, “No way.”

“So, it’s settled. Now, for a portal.” Sapnap says, like it’s just that easy.

“I know -” George starts, but Karl can’t just let things keep going without saying something.

“Guys.” Karl interrupts, hugging Sapnap tighter. His heart beats, hard and fast, against his ribcage. Sometimes, Karl lets how truly lucky he is fall to the back of his mind, but they always remind him, somehow, in the end.

“I appreciate you all a lot. The ride-or-die is felt. But, as Dream is well fucking aware, the Nether isn’t a good place. I love you all, but I can do it. It’ll be quick and easy, just popping in to talk to the Empress and then I’m back home by sundown. It’s okay if I do it alone.”

The room is quiet. Karl lets them process, ducking his face into Sapnap’s hair. It’s the right thing to do, isn’t it? To say no to their offer, though he wants nothing more than for them to just...take care of it for him? He doesn’t want to put them in any more danger than they’ve all already faced. He’s good at talking, good at surviving. The heat might be a bit of an issue, if it’s anything like the Crimson Forest, but he’ll make it work. He can do this.

“Anyway,” George says, “there’s a portal in Kinoko. I never knew what it was, but I’d bet that it’s got to do with the Nether. My parents always told me it’s where my however-many-great-grandfather brought our family into power. Something tells me a stupid human made a deal with a, what did Puffy call it? A Vex? I bet that’s where it happened.”

“George, if you weren’t you, I’d kiss you,” Sapnap crows, “A portal in Kinoko would be great. We could just travel there, maybe the tug or whatever will just give up since we already have a portal.”

“Or maybe that’s where it’s leading him, anyway,” Quackity offers.

“Guys?” Karl peeks, “Did you hear me?”

“If you’re done saying stupid shit, you can rejoin the conversation.” George dismisses him. “If you’re just going to make more noise with your mouth, you can stop.”

“Stupid - *hey!*” Karl pulls away from Sapnap to huff, “I just don’t want any of you to be hurt!”

“And that’s nice of you.” Dream takes a deep breath. “But if you’re going into the Nether, we’re going with you. That’s just how it works.”

“But -”

“Would you go, if it were one of us?” Quackity sets his mug down loudly, more aggressive than Karl is used to him being with breakables.

“Yes.” Karl admits.

“Then shut up about going alone.” Quackity gives him a sharp look, the rims of his eyes red. “You’re in danger right now. We’re helping you. That’s what it means to be family. Right?”

“...right.” Karl says, suddenly choked up. He has to blink a few times to clear his vision, but he’s able to do it, sniffing only a little. “S-so, a portal in Kinoko?”

“You guys remember the birch forest?” George says, and then trails off. Quackity winces.

“Yes.” Sapnap says. “I recall.”

“Yeah, well,” George shakes off the tension without pause, “My family sort of...built that forest. The original saplings came from a small grove a bit outside of the capital. It’s private land; no one but my family is allowed on it, and it’s warded, even. With the throne now destroyed, the wards might have fallen. That’ll most likely be where the portal is.”

“So, what? We go to the portal, into the Nether, find the Court, bully the Empress, and go home?” Dream hums thoughtfully. “It’s a good plan.”

“It isn’t much of a plan,” Quackity sighs, “But it’s all we have.”

“I say we skip dinner,” Sapnap leans more fully into Karl, “Sleep in tomorrow, set out for Kinoko by noon. We’ll be there in three weeks, if we make good time.”

“We need to go to dinner.” Dream argues, and continues before George can say his very obvious piece on that, “It isn’t about Puffy! Well, it is, sort of. She knows where the Court is. I’ve been there, okay? I know how big a place the Nether is. It isn’t just a building, or something. It’s a world. A realm. We could live out our whole lives and never find the Court. We need to ask Puffy for directions, a hint - something. And, besides. We’ll get there faster, if we go by boat.”

“You want to charter Puffy?” Karl can’t help but ask, unsure about that decision. She’s *Dream’s* not-mom, and Karl would be more than willing to pick her brain more about what’s going on, but being stuck on a boat for a week with her after that stellar lack of awareness back in the cabin...Karl isn’t sure if he’d survive that trip from the tension alone, nor if *she* would survive that trip if she hurt Dream’s feelings in front of Sapnap and George again.

“No.” Dream says immediately. “No. Someone else. A different ship to take us. It’s just faster. We’d be less exhausted, if we were just sailing with a crew to do the work. We have enough in our purse, I think.”

“We have plenty.” Sapnap shrugs. “And Bad would be willing to help us, if we asked.”

“We cannot keep borrowing off your parents.” Karl laughs despite himself, the stress drifting to the side as a tried-and-true argument makes itself known.

“Yes, we can.” Sapnap sniffs. “What *else* are they gonna do with it all?”

“Spend it themselves?” Quackity offers.

“If they didn’t want to pay for everything for my whole life, they shouldn’t have spoiled me.” Sapnap says firmly, and it’s not the first time Karl has heard the words but it still makes him cackle, shoving his face into Sapnap’s shoulder as he practically wheezes.

“You’re insane.” Quackity says, wonder in his voice, as always.

“No, he just has loving, loaded parents.” George shrugs, and that makes Karl giggle, too.

“Either way,” Dream brings them back to task, finally smiling a little, himself. “We can charter a boat tonight. We’ll stop by for dinner, get some hints from Puffy, maybe see if Phil might have any ideas, then charter a boat, and leave in the morning.”

“We really have to see them again?” George nearly pouts.

“We do.” Quackity slumps.

Karl can’t stop himself from smiling, though he knows that the fangs flash when his lips are spread so wide in a grin. It’s only that he just...

He loves them, yes, but he also just fucking enjoys each of the people in this room. They’re all so willing to go to a dinner where *none* of them are going to be comfortable or happy, just

to help everyone else feel a bit better about having to be there. Stupid. Foolishness, even. Karl wouldn't have it any other way.

"I'm going to bat Wilbur around like a cat toy." He says, just to make George laugh hard enough to snort, breaking the tension, and it sends Sapnap and Dream giggling too, even though Quackity crosses his arms and rolls his eyes. He's smiling, though, wider by the second, and Karl will take it. Fuck, after that big information overload, their laughter is a balm. He'll have to hope that he can keep them laughing in the Nether, when he'll need something to soothe the heat more than ever.

Foolish does come to get them, and he rambles the whole way back to the dock. Sapnap and George are fully committing to hating everyone related to Puffy on Dream's behalf, and Dream looks too overwhelmed to keep up with the conversation, so Karl and Quackity do most of the talking as they walk. Foolish tells them about the market in the city, the wares that Puffy had sent him off to purchase that morning, the people he'd met.

Karl can tell he's a bit of an out-loud processor but he catches on that Dream is overwhelmed pretty quickly and, despite his enthusiasm, he switches to Karl without visible disappointment, which is a point in his favor.

They make it back to Puffy's ship without issue, and Karl takes a few seconds to finally glance at the name of it. The *Michelle* is a pretty big vessel, bigger than Karl's ever been on before, though not the largest that he's ever seen, nor even the largest at port. Puffy and her ship fly under a split flag; half white and half red, with the outline of a ram's head in the middle. If it weren't full of walking emotional damage bombs for all of his friends, Karl wouldn't mind sailing on her.

Technoblade and Tubbo are waiting for them at the gangplank, Tubbo waving and Techno looking as unapproachable as ever, and Foolish disappears with a wink, back onto the ship while they're greeted.

"You guys came!" Tubbo smiles, blue eyes flashing under curls of chestnut hair, "Wilbur said you were going to run off again, but Tommy and I bet him a whole wheel of cheese that you wouldn't."

"If we'd known about the bet, we would have told you to get more out of him." Dream says easily, shedding the awkward air he'd had with Foolish. "Still, a wheel of cheese between the two of you doesn't sound like a good idea in a cabin that small."

Tubbo and Sapnap both guffaw, and the joke manages to pull huffs of amusement from the rest of the party despite the brimming nerves. Quackity is wearing Karl's cloak again, which Karl had insisted on, and Karl knows that Sapnap's hand had disappeared into the folds of it to hold Quackity's as soon as they'd reached the docks.

"We can't stay long, unfortunately." George says as they file onto the deck, "We need to talk to the dockmaster before they leave for the night."

“We need to ask Phil and Puffy a few questions, and then we’re off,” Karl agrees, “As much as we appreciate dinner.”

“Hey, no skin off my nose,” Techno shrugs, “You guys have to tell Tommy, though. He’s been racin’ around the kitchen tryin’ ta’ get things ready for you.”

Dream winces. “Maybe...”

“Before the dockmaster goes home tonight, we need to speak with him.” Quackity clears his throat and Karl sees Dream give in and nod.

“Well, Puffy and Philza’re both in the officers’ mess,” Techno motions over his shoulder, “Come on, if they’re who you’re lookin’ for ‘n’ all. Lead the way, Tubs,” Techno prompts and Tubbo takes off, much to Karl’s amusement. Man, what he’d do to have energy like that again.

They follow Tubbo, Technoblade leading their little party down some stairs built into the deck, deeper into the belly of the *Michelle* and down narrow, stout halls that Technoblade and Dream both have to duck down to get through without risking brain injury every few steps. A few turns and a dizzying staircase later bring them to a large, open room, where a table has been set for a not-insignificant number of people.

Puffy and Phil are both seated at the table, conversing over two glasses of wine. Puffy looks worried, but otherwise relaxed, and Phil seems as even-keeled as ever, casually sipping at the white in his glass. Wilbur is sitting not far from him, a much bigger glass in hand, though less wine than either Puffy or Phil, and Tommy is pacing behind his chair, while Ranboo hovers, clutching a glass that Karl has a feeling is filled with juice instead of wine. Damn, what Karl would do for a glass or five of that right now, honestly.

“You came!” Tommy is the first to spot them and he whirls around, pointing an accusing finger at Wilbur, “I *told you* they’d come. You owe the ol’ Tubster and I so much cheese!”

“So I see.” Wilbur says, tipping his glass toward them in greeting. Karl forces a smile and then turns to Puffy and Phil, who have both stood to greet them.

“Welcome,” Puffy comes around the table, “We weren’t sure if you’d be able to make it, but we’re glad you’re here.”

“Thank you.” George says politely. “We won’t be able to stay long. We have things we need to get done before tomorrow. You said to come back if we had questions.”

“Questions, of course.” Puffy deflates a bit, and then squares her shoulders and smiles, “Well, no time like the present to ask them! Are you hungry? Dinner is served if you’d like to snack and talk.”

“Uh,” Karl glances at Sapnap, who shrugs, though he doesn’t look happy about it.

“No, thank you. We don’t have much time.” George says.

Tommy's face falls, though he quickly composes it, and Karl knows what's going to happen before it does, and is already trying to hide a smile when Dream says, "Actually, I'm hungry. A few bites wouldn't hurt."

George makes a soft, annoyed sigh, but he motions to the table, "Yes, we'd love to stay for a moment, then."

"Wonderful," Puffy says, and looks at Tommy, "Toms, help an old woman out?"

"Old, my arse," Phil scoffs, amused, as Tommy nearly vaults over the table to reach Puffy's side and walk with her to the closed window of the serving hatch. While she and Tommy unlatch the window, Dream takes a seat at the table and Karl follows, though he pauses to let Sapnap pick a chair first. He isn't sure which of them Sapnap would want most immediate access to, in this particular seating arrangement.

In the end, Karl sits in the dead middle between Dream and Quackity, George and Sapnap taking up the flanks as if they've created a battle formation. It would be funny, if Wilbur's eyes casually brushing near Quackity didn't make Karl very aware that he'd be willing to turn this into a battle if necessary, too.

Dinner is, of course, fish, freshly grilled by Puffy's crew cook, with some sort of rice dish and a hardy chunk of freshly baked bread.

"Tommy caught most of these," Phil says as the food is served by an over-excited teenager and the Captain of the ship. "Spent most of the morning at it."

"You caught these?" Karl says with appropriate aplomb and doesn't even have to pretend to be impressed. He'd not been much of a fisherman, not even when they'd all been on the run. He moves too much, scares the fish off.

"I did," Tommy says with pride, "All by myself, thanks very much. Tubbo and Ranboo got *bored* and went off to play footsie or whatever shit those affianced do together."

"We literally did a puzzle, not ten feet from where you were cursing up a storm with a hook and line, you -" Tubbo starts, but cuts himself off when Phil clears his throat.

"Tubbo and Ranboo aren't the only ones with wedding bells in the future, though, *are* they?" Wilbur leans forward, elbows on the table, and rests his chin on the back of his hand. "I see gold bands, Mister Jacobs. A fashion statement? Oh, but you and your beloveds match! How sweet. Are we to expect invitations soon?"

Karl purposefully keeps his hands relaxed. He's been wearing his ring since the one-year mark of their relationship, when Sapnap and Quackity had finally allowed him to plan a proposal and he hadn't taken it off for even a single second. He'd forgotten that he hadn't always had it, so used to seeing the occasional glint of gold around his finger, around Sapnap's or Quackity's. He'd forgotten how observant and pointed Wilbur could be when he wants to cause a problem.

“No.” Karl smiles. “It’ll be a closed ceremony, unfortunately. Family only. Thank you for noticing.”

“We’re here to talk about the Nether, not our wedding.” Sapnap says when Wilbur opens his mouth again. “If you want to talk nuptials, try sending us a letter when this is all done. We’ll get back to you.”

“Sapnap getting married? Bad and Skeppy must be thrilled.” Puffy smiles, and then her eyes go wide and she looks to Dream and then George, “But, oh, you two - you’ve already - ?”

“No.” Dream answers the unspoken question, looking down at his plate. “Not yet.”

“We’re discussing venues right now.” George says tightly. “Similar to Sapnap’s, it will be a family-only affair.”

“Small wedding, then.” Wilbur says into his glass.

“Might have been bigger, once,” George smiles thinly. “And then someone got a bit greedy, didn’t they, Wil? Lucky for us they didn’t finish the job, so at least there will be someone at the altar, I guess.”

Tommy chokes on his drink, coughing harshly as Ranboo gently pats his back. Wilbur sets his wine glass down sharply.

“Okay,” Phil says, loud. “The matter at hand, lads. Questions?”

“We just need to know a few things.” Karl says. “Directions to the Court, specifically. Any hints you might give us.”

“I don’t have any specifics,” Puffy says, frowning as she picks at her fish. “It was all... instinct, for me. I just followed where my tug led me. I went up, I remember that. It was a climb, for me, once I was in the Nether. And I ended up at the Court. I can tell you it’s a large castle. It doesn’t seem like it fits the...aesthetic, which I know doesn’t make much sense, but you’ll see. That’s all I have.”

“Up is a start.” Karl puts a hand over his heart, where even now he feels the pull to *go*. “And if all we have to do is follow *me*...”

“We’ll find it.” Quackity says, taking his hand..Karl smiles back at him. Yes, how could he doubt it? He’s followed his heart his whole life, and it’s brought him to them. He’s scared of this feeling, but maybe, just like it always has, it will work out.

Phil sighs. “I don’t have any more information, on my end. I’ve visited the Nether but it wasn’t a good experience, and it was a long, long, *long* time ago. I’ve never been to the Court, nor have I met the Empress. I’ve got nothin’.”

“Worth a shot,” Dream shrugs, looking at Karl. “It’s all we have. It’ll be enough.”

“We’ll make it work.” Sapnap says firmly. “We’ve done more with less.”

“Heartwarming.” Wilbur says thinly and then there is a *thump* and he jumps with a wince. None of his family moves, so Karl can only assume it was perhaps one of his boys. He wouldn’t doubt that Tubbo has a Grade A poker face, at least.

“This is good fish, Tommy.” Quackity says into the stiff silence.

“Yes, it is.” George takes a careful bite of his fish and Karl follows suit. He’d feel bad, if he didn’t at least try it after all the hubbub about it from Tommy. It’s not a bad fish. He takes a second bite under Tommy’s watchful eye, though he feels that he’s abandoned by the stare as Dream digs in and Tommy becomes much more interested in *his* response than Karl’s. He glances over to check and finds that half of Sapnap’s plate has been cleaned, though he still doesn’t look pleased about being here.

“Thanks, guys!” Tommy practically vibrates in his seat, “I helped the cook with ‘em, too. Taught her a few tricks, even, I did, just ask Phil, he saw it!”

There’s a sudden knock on the door frame, cutting through the tension. It’s Foolish, Karl sees as he turns to look over his shoulder.

Foolish smiles, sharp teeth on display. “Hiya, folks. Don’t mean to interrupt, it’s just - I overheard when you guys got here that you wanted to talk to the dockmaster. It’s just past sunset now, so you’ve got about fifteen minutes before he heads off for the night.”

“Thank you, Foolish.” George says, voice carefully empty.

“Dockmaster?” Puffy blinks, thoughtful.

Fuck.

“Why’re you looking for him?” She continues, curious and willing to be rude about it. Ah, so she’s where Dream gets his bluntness from.

“Nothing in particular,” Karl tries, but her eyes narrow and sharpen.

“You already have an idea of where you’re going.” She says, “You’re chartering a boat, aren’t you?”

“No,” Karl says, as Dream says, “Yes.”

“Dream!” George hisses.

“We’re chartering a boat to Kinoko.” Dream says. “We have a feeling there’s something there that can help us. It’s faster to go by sea than by land, so. Chartering.”

“Let me take you.” Puffy motions. “I have a whole ship, right here. It’ll save you a pretty penny, to be sure.”

“You’ve got passengers.” Dream says gently. “Thank you for the offer, but you’re currently busy. We need to leave in the morning.”

“And our destination adds quite the extension to their trip.” Phil agrees. “I’d usually be more than willing to find a different ship, Puffy, but we need to be where we’re going within the next two weeks and taking a captain I haven’t vetted yet...that’s not really an option for us.”

“See?” Dream sets his silverware down carefully. “So, we need to get going, before we miss the dockmaster. Thank you for the meal, guys, it was really good.”

“Aw, but you just got here,” Tommy protests, “It’s gonna be ages before we’re back, you know. You’re sure we can’t hang out a little before you leave?”

“Sorry, Tommy,” Dream says, and he does sound genuinely apologetic. “This is important. We’ll set up a time for you to come visit us, okay? You’ll like our house, it’s really cool.”

"A little play date might be fun. *Or,*" Wilbur says, genial in tone but something sharper than Nightmare's blade behind it, "You could come with us."

It really is adorable how Tommy's eyes widen in delight; clearly the prospect of several of his favorite people coming with him is almost too much for him to humanly bear. But Karl is far more interested in how both Techno and Phil look at Wilbur with identical furrows to their brow. Techno's shoulders hunch forward, the same way that Sapnap's do when he's feeling protective of them.

"Wilbur," Phil says, warningly, "Think very carefully about what you're suggesting right now."

"Puffy brought up a good point earlier. *Why* is this happening to Karl *now*? Why not when he was eighteen and messing around with magic for the first time?"

"I was thirteen, thank you very much," Karl frowns, stung.

"It doesn't matter," Wilbur waves him off, "My point stands. It's improved, even! Why are his traits waking up now? Surely it's better if they go in more prepared, to the Nether. We know someone, maybe the *only someone*, who might know why. The only one apart from the Blaze Empress herself, of course."

"Is that really the only reason?" Techno asks.

"Of course not." Wilbur admits, "Think of the political relations! The Courts are a little... contentious, as of late, and a Vex arriving with good intentions and in good faith to the Other Side would be a net positive all around."

"I am not," Karl says coldly, "a Vex."

"Not yet," Wilbur says, and it takes a full strength potion's effort of willpower not to punch him then and there. As it is, Karl marks it down for another day.

"You'll get your answers," Wilbur continues "And the Courts get a nice little ego boost for both sides. Goodwill is maintained, and more importantly for you lot," He points a fork speared with some poor salmon in their general direction, "You've already gained favor with at least one deity, possibly two! It's a plan with only positives."

"I can think of a couple of negatives, Wilbur," Techno says, and he might be acting laid back but his tone most certainly isn't. "Namely the ones about *bringing them to the End*."

"Techno!" Phil says, sharply but the damage is already done.

"You're going to a stronghold. That's where the Other Side is. The *End*." Karl says, in a rush of realization, "I thought all the End Portals had been destroyed centuries ago."

"They were," Phil says, "And for good reason. The End - and the Other Side - they're no place for mortals."

"*You're* going." George points out.

"We have... pre-arranged protection. You would not. And it's supposed to be a *secret*." Phil finishes, glaring at both Wilbur and Techno. They've never looked more like the twins that Wilbur claims to be when they are both being scolded.

"I trust them," Tommy speaks up. "Dream saved me when the throne took me -" Karl doesn't miss Wilbur's wince, and files that information away for later, "And I know Sapnap and Gogy would have done the same."

"Big Q kept me safe from Schlatt, when we were politiking in Kinoko," Tubbo adds, "I fucked up a bit, and he helped cover for me. He's our friend."

"We might not know you as well as we do the others, Karl," Ranboo says, "But you didn't have to give us another chance last time, after we had just spent ages trying to capture you. But you did." He shrugs, "Plus, it was really funny when you punched Wilbur. That was great."

Wilbur sighs dramatically as his family guffaws around him, "Despite the fact that Mister Jacobs did, in fact, assault me, I do, remarkably, trust them. Or at least, trust that they want a quiet life after all this is over more than they want to fuck us, or the Other Side, over."

Phil still looks hesitant as he stares them all down with a critical eye.

"I'll be honest, Phil," Sapnap says, "I couldn't give less of a shit about the Courts, or the politics, or whatever the fuck Wilbur likes to ramble about. I just want my family safe. And if going to the Other Side and keeping my mouth shut about how I got there and what I saw is how to make that a reality, I'll do it."

Phil raises up his hands, "It's not that I don't trust you guys, it's just... Letting people into the End is a little above my pay grade."

There's a second of silence, then Wilbur opens his mouth to say something - and, instead, makes a noise like someone just stepped very hard on his foot. Karl imagines a victory punch and allows himself to feel just a little smug. Whatever Wilbur was going to say seems to have been pointless, though, if the puppy dog eyes that the kids are throwing at Phil are anything to go by.

"I'll think about it, alright?" He softens, "I'll have to ask. Call in a favor or two. That is," he turns to them, "If that is what *you* want to do."

"Going to the End?" Karl hesitates, looking down one side of the table and then the other. Dream looks conflicted, and George is stone faced. Quackity seems to be doing his best impression of George, and Sapnap looks resolute, though what he's decided on is unknown to Karl.

"If we go, can you get us an audience with the queen?" Quackity asks, looking between Phil and Wilbur.

"Sure." Wilbur nods. "That shouldn't be too hard."

"And you think she'll have answers?"

"She *might*," Phil emphasizes, "know something. But I can't promise she does. I can't promise this trip will be worth putting off *your* trip by a solid two weeks."

"If we went with you, what's the time frame for getting back to Kinoko?" George asks Puffy, who sits back to think.

"We're about...two weeks from Phil's stop," Puffy says thoughtfully, "But that brings us closer to Kinoko than you'd think. A bit less than a week will bring you to Kinoko. Less than two, I can have you at Targay, if that's where you're going."

"...and you think I'll hold out that long?" Karl motions to his face, touching under his eye. "How long does the transformation take?"

"I think," Puffy hesitates. "It's different for everyone. But the stronger the person, the longer the transformation takes. If you can fight it, toward the end, you...you may be able to do it."

"Is the chance for answers worth it?" Wilbur asks when Puffy's response ushers in quiet.

"...fuck." Karl rubs his face. "*Fuck*."

"I sure hope your queen has answers." Quackity says and Karl looks up from his hands to see him.

"She may." Wilbur shrugs. "It's a gamble, Big Q. You love those."

"We're lucky." Karl says firmly. "I say we risk it."

"We won't know unless we try." Dream agrees.

"I don't like it." Sapnap sighs. "But if it's what you guys think we need to do, I'm with you."

George, lips pinched closed, nods shortly.

"I guess we're joining you, Phil." Dream sits back, "Puffy. Thanks for having us."

“Nice!” Tommy punches the air, and that, at least, makes Karl laugh a little.

“I guess that means that you can stay for dinner.” Puffy smiles, and the amusement plummets.

Ah, yes. Dinner with Karl - turning into an otherworldly creature - and Dream - who is avoiding Puffy’s eyes as best he can by staring at his plate - and George - who is doing his scary Prince George face - and Sapnap - who keeps glaring at Wilbur - and Quackity - who is doing everything in his power to obviously stop existing right now - and Wilbur - who they all hate - and Wilbur’s family - who they all have mixed feelings for - and Puffy - who they all are decidedly on the ‘keep hurting Dream’s feelings and you’re going overboard’ team about.

“Sounds lovely.” He says and shovels a spoonful of rice into his mouth.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Chapter 4! As always, thank you so much for your continued support - tell us all your thoughts and feelings and theories in the comments (please. we are starving. it is all we live on)

We love u, dear readers!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It is with a sense of cruel trepidation that they set sail from Pandora at sunrise on the next day.

The harsh architecture of the city seems almost beseeching as Puffy sails the *Michelle* into the Skeleton Estuary. Quackity watches as the cloudy morning steals away the rigid spirals of towers he'd not yet had a chance to visit from view, the choppy waves rocking the ship enough to make him nauseous.

Sapnap knows it in the way he always seems able to, pulling Quackity closer and holding him against his chest. Quackity leans into the embrace as they watch the city disappear together.

It had been a cool night, even as they had all, once again, piled in the main bedroom, bracketing each other against the metaphorical storm that was to come. Quackity hadn't been sure who was protecting whom; Dream, reeling from Puffys revelations and coming to terms with the fact he would be spending an extended period of time with her; Karl, grappling with unwelcome and unwanted changes; Sapnap, who just wanted to go home; George, quiet on the outside but with righteous anger burning in him? Not to mention that Quackity was almost certain to wake up with phantom hands around his wings and his throat.

Had he held Karl's hand so tightly for Karl's comfort or his own, when the two of them had made a place for themselves in one of the camp beds? Had George known that Sapnap would sleep more soundly underneath him and Dream than on the other camp bed, or squished under Karl and Quackity, or had it been a desire to hold his knights close after the frankly appalling forty-eight hours they'd just experienced? Was it a mix of both things that had Sapnap reaching out into the small space between where he lay and the camp bed to find Karl's cloak and grasp it like a lifeline? Who could tell?

Somehow, they'd slept.

In the cool grey of Pandora's early morning, Sapnap had packed what they could fit from the cart into the enderchest and stowed the rest in the apartment. When a decision about Patches had needed to be made, it was unanimous; Dream, Quackity, and George had left Sapnap and

Karl to pack and headed to the stable they'd lodged her in, checking her out early, even if it meant forfeiting the fee they paid in advance for her care. She was pleased to see them, though none more so than Dream, who'd attached himself to her before she'd even been released back to him, and was calmly led by the reins to the docks once they'd all met back up.

It was an impractical decision to bring Patches on the ship, Quackity knew. It would be easier, and safer, to have her ridden to Kinoko to meet them at the capitol, or even a port city. But Quackity hadn't hesitated when Dream had brought it up, not when he knew she'd bring Dream comfort, at least. The soft expression Dream bestowed on her, and the way his hand twisted in her mane as if she and George were the only things keeping him standing had been proof enough that it was the right call.

Foolish had been waiting at the gangplank for them, looking much more awake than anyone had any right to be before the sun was up, but he hadn't tried to make them talk. The plank had been made wider for Patches, who'd been mentioned at dinner, and she'd been loaded up along with the rest of them, nervous but calmed by Dream's steady hand as she swayed her way to the deck.

With the five of them and Patches on the ship, and only immaterial supplies left at the apartment, the city was free of them not even two days after they'd arrived into it so ready to spend at least a week's time within the walls.

Quackity had barely been in Pandora at all, and he's sorry to leave it behind now. He'd not really thought about it until they'd crossed the border into the city, but it's the most people have ever seen his wings in a long, long time - ever, even. He'd grown so used to having them out in the open back home that it hadn't even crossed his mind that it had been years since he was out in public with his wings bare until they'd prepared themselves for the arena and he'd wanted to cover up.

He thinks that he might have attracted a couple of sympathetic, or perhaps pitying stares, but as a whole... no one had cared. Most of the population were hybrids in this continent; if anyone stood out in a city like Pandora, it was Dream and George, currently the most human of them all. The people of Pandora barely batted an eyelid at an avian with small, scarred wings, and moved around them to give them the space they needed as easy as breathing. In Kinoko, Quackity had spent too long with his wings pressed against his back by his belts and the weight of another person. Here, no one cared. Not even Karl, with his white eyes, returned to pupilless pale pools at nightfall - and hadn't *that* been a discovery in the middle of dinner - had garnered much attention.

Quackity isn't looking forward to being back in Kinoko, where he's back to being someone to stare at for his wings; though, to be fair, there is much worse that he's not looking forward to about going back to Kinoko than that. It's all about perspective.

At least on the boat, there's only one person he'd had to prepare for untowardly staring at his wings - he'd thought, at least, but Technoblade seems to have taken a page out of his brother's book and Quackity has caught him staring more than a few times.

He can cope with that, he thinks. There isn't the same desire in Techno's eyes, none of the interest that seems ever-present in Wilbur's. As long as Techno doesn't try to speak to him, Quackity is good. Mostly.

Sapnap leans his head on Quackity's shoulder, huffing.

"We're never leaving home again." Sapnap mutters, just loud enough for Quackity to hear. The grumpy voice is enough to make Quackity smile.

"It would have happened anyway, idiot. At least we had people here that could help us."

"It wouldn't have happened." Sapnap argues, though Quackity can tell he's just being stubborn.

"Fine." Quackity gives in, turning to kiss Sapnap's temple. "It wouldn't have happened. But it did. Are you ready?"

"I have to be, don't I?" Sapnap sighs, and it's much too forlorn for Quackity's taste. As much as Quackity will regret not being able to explore the city, he'll always value a view of Sapnap more, so he turns in his arms so they're facing each other, leaning back a little so he can get a proper look at Sapnap. He looks tired, pale bruises under his eyes and brows furrowed in a familiar line of stress.

"Yes." Quackity admits, resting his hands on Sapnap's shoulders. "But you're not alone this time. None of us are missing our memory, or possessed by magic, or -" he smiles shallowly, "have ulterior motives, Sap. We're in this together."

"It's just," Sapnap's hands clench against Quackity's back as his eyes drop, big and brown and worried, the sort of puppy-dog eyes that make Quackity melt every time they land on him, "I don't get this place. First George, and then Dream, and now Karl? Why does it keep trying to take the people I love? What does it want?"

"I don't know." Quackity gentles his palms across Sapnap's shirt, straightening the loose fabric across his chest. "But we're going to find out. And hey, look," he lets his wings flap a bit, muscles pulling and feathers fluffing up, "I'm an avian. There's no chance I'm an avian that's also somehow connected to the Nether. Once we've done this, we'll never have to deal with the Nether again."

Sapnap's lips twitch, a smile sliding into place.

"You sure are an avian. Your wings are pretty." He almost coos, and Quackity should have expected it but it makes him flush all the same.

"Thanks to you," He lets them spread out, showing them off without too much thought to the crew running the ship. He doesn't care if they see, if anyone on the ship sees. He's showing them off to *Sapnap*, one of the very few opinions he cares about, especially with regards to his wings. And, as always, Sapnap gives him a reaction worth the risk of it all; worry replaced with wonder, smile growing as Sapnap looks at them. It's nearly a weekly routine by this point, Karl and Sapnap helping him preen; his feathers are growing in thick and brown

after his last molt, only a bit of yellow left, the scarred areas less noticeable now that the plumage is coming in properly. His feathers gleam even in the watery light of a sunrise over ocean mist and it's beautiful. They *feel* beautiful.

Sapnap seems enraptured, hands tight in Quackity's shirt, and Quackity finds himself giggling at the considerable restraint.

"You can touch." he allows, and Sapnap's eyes go to his face, double-checking.

"You're sure? We're -" Sapnap glances around, "Not at home."

"Carefully," Quackity clarifies. "Don't start anything funny, but...you can. If you want."

Sapnap touches their foreheads together in a gentle knock, an amended sign of affection that Quackity recognizes and appreciates, and then familiar, warm hands are moving to his wings. Sapnap keeps to the less sensitive parts, stroking his fingers over the top feathers along what remains of the curves

"This isn't fair." Sapnap says through his smile, distracted as he watches his fingers glide over the feathers, which tends to be his reaction every time he touches them, as Quackity knew when he offered.

"I don't know what you mean." Quackity lies, but he knows his affectionate tone gives him away and he's fine with that. Touches like these, they won't start anything weird in his brain; they're comforting, normal - if Quackity had grown up as safe and welcome as he is with his family now, then he'd be far more used to friends touching them like this. He's still working on it with Dream and George, working up the nerve to ask and offer, if they're interested - but Sapnap is someone he'd trust without hesitation when it comes to his wings and he does so now.

"Distracting me with my favorite things isn't fair," Sapnap sighs, hands slowly settling into the feathers and resting. There's little to no weight behind the hold, yet Quackity feels very much as if his wings are all that support Sapnap right now.

"I don't play fair much," Quackity teases him. "Besides, you touching them is one of *my* favorite things. This is purely selfish, what's happening right here."

"Oh, is it?" Sapnap smirks, leaning down to nuzzle his face into Quackity's neck, his scruff itchy and tickling - Quackity squawks, batting at him, but he's laughing and so is Sapnap and, really, wasn't that the goal? A little beard burn is a price Quackity would gladly pay for the privilege of hearing it.

"Just say the word," Sapnap whispers when he's closer, "And we can go do a few more of your favorite things somewhere private."

Quackity lets his fingers tangle in the thick curls at the back of Sapnap's neck, hiding his laughter in Sapnap's shoulder, warm from the words and the hands still in his wings and how very hot Sapnap always runs, the perfect temperature to keep Quackity comfortable.

“Maybe.” He considers, lips pursed. “We’ll find Karl and an empty cabin.”

“Oh, two more of my favorite things,” Sapnap gives his wings one last, loving pet and lets his hands fall to Quackity’s sides, where he rests. They’re swaying with the boat, Quackity realizes, but he doesn’t feel sick from this. Just happy. Calm, despite how stressful everything has been.

They sit together in the quiet, the ship coming to life around them; Quackity thinks he hears Puffy’s voice shouting orders, but he doesn’t bother looking around to find her. His focus is on Sapnap; par for the course, since the night Sapnap changed his life, really.

“Thank you.” Sapnap speaks up again, voice soft, tender if no longer playful. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Big Q. You really are my angel.”

“Disgusting.” Quackity kisses his cheek and then his nose and his other cheek, “You’re absolutely disgusting. Distasteful, even.”

“Mhm,” Sapnap hums, letting Quackity kiss his forehead, “Sure, that’s why you want your lips all over me. Because I’m so gross.”

“I want my lips all over you because I want to make you -” Quackity starts to say, gearing up to pull a blush from his fiancé or mortify himself trying, until he notices a familiar clash of patterns and colors - he’s as primed to notice that cloak as he is anything. “Oh, would you look at that? Karl’s back on deck. They must have finished with Patches and getting a cabin settled.”

“Tease.”

“I thought I was an angel?” Quackity pushes at Sapnap’s shoulders lightly and he’s released, though not without reluctance.

It’s not just Karl who’s returned to deck to watch the weak sunrise, though Karl is the only one that approaches them. Dream and George are still missing, but Phil and Wilbur are standing near the helm, eyes on the horizon. Well. At least one of them has their eyes on the horizon. Quackity shakes off Wilbur’s stare and turns to focus on Karl.

“Whatever conversation I’ve walked in on, I’m very interested to continue it,” Karl takes Quackity’s hand and Quackity prepares himself for whatever nonsense Karl is about to spout at him, “but I do need to confirm, first and foremost, that you, Quackity, are an angel if there ever was one to grace this land. When you talk, bells hold their tongues to better hear it and shudder in jealousy -”

“He let me touch his wings,” Sapnap says casually.

“*What the fuck?*” Karl blanches, “I was gone for, like, ten minutes!”

“Sapnap was sad,” Quackity laughs, squeezing Karl’s hands, “Jealous?”

“Oh, certainly.” Karl looks between them, the silver of his eyes bright and obvious now that day has returned, the fangs once again small and hidden behind his lips. “Though I’m not

sure of who. Sapnap, who got to touch, or you, who got to watch him go mad for it.”

“Help us find an empty place to hide and maybe we can apologize for leaving you out,” Sapnap says, voice low, and Karl’s cheeks go pink as he grins.

“I think I know a spot...”

“Oh, you’ve snooped already?” Quackity shakes his head, “I should have known. Between your nosy fingers and George’s, I’m surprised you don’t have a map of the ship for us yet.”

“Give us until nightfall,” Karl winks. “For now, I did find a nice little hideaway, and the crew is busy...unless you’d rather watch the sunrise.”

“I’ve watched the sunrise a hundred times,” Sapnap looks around to make sure the coast is clear and then takes them both by the hand, “Quick, before someone decides we’re important.”

Quackity, bemused and infatuated, follows without another thought.

Dream can’t let go of Patches.

He strokes her mane with a brush and she lets him, uncaring as ever of what he’s doing so long as he’s kind when he does it and keeps her well supplied with the good treats.

Untangling her mane gives him something to do that isn’t standing on the deck, watching the land drift out of view, thinking of the last time he was on a ship at sea. How nervous and excited he’d been when Kinoko had first come into view, the ball of pure *feeling* in his stomach that had been too entangled for him to even begin to understand at that age. All he’d known then was that his life was going to change, that he had people waiting for him somewhere, and that he probably wouldn’t be returning to the sea.

Dream isn’t sure how old Puffy is. He knows that she was older than he is now when she found him, though. Older than he is now when she’d taken him in, raised him on a ship not unlike this one. Older than he is now when she’d told him they were going to Kinoko and then took him there and then settled him there and then left him there to return to the sea. With no regrets, no loss of what mattered to her.

He doesn’t know how old she is, but she’d been older than he is now when she’d left him in Kinoko, and that is well and truly old enough to just tell him why she needed to leave. She hadn’t, though.

“She just wrote me a letter,” he says to Patches. “You know? Left it on my night stand while I was sleeping. She was in the castle when I went to sleep, and gone when I woke up.”

Dream isn’t sure how to feel about it. He’s - fine. Really. In the end, it doesn’t matter, does it? It’s happened, it’s past. He’s who he is, and she’s who she is, and, when he thinks about it, he can’t imagine it going any other way than how it had gone. What was she supposed to do? Hug him and wipe his tears? He’d been a teenager - practically an adult. He shouldn’t have

needed her to do that in the first place. She'd had a whole...a whole crew, a ship - all waiting for her. She'd had a deal to keep. A life to return to, with Dream firmly entrenched in the one she'd worked damn hard to make sure he had - safe and rich, fed and loved, trained and educated, respected and admired.

He can't help but ask himself, though. Had she known about the throne? Had Puffy known about the Warden? Had she known that the Warden would take Dream or Sappnap? What had she *known* when she'd just - left?

Probably not much, if he's honest with himself. Puffy had been captain of the guard. She'd trained knights and escorted the queen and prince consort around when necessary, but she hadn't been close to them. If Bad hadn't known, there was no way that Puffy had.

It was just bad luck. Just bad luck.

"Bad luck." He says to Patches. She whinnies in agreement and he pats her back and returns to brushing her mane well past the point where the last knot is untangled.

George and Karl were meant to get a cabin arranged; they'd left Dream with Patches, once Foolish had shown them to the lower deck where she'd be kept. There's no window down here, nor much else. Just a simple little stall, some fresh hay and horse feed in a tightly closed bag, a lantern that lights up the room that he'll have to take with him when he leaves so it doesn't accidentally start a fire, and the slings cradling her body to keep her safe on the water.

He feels awful at the idea of leaving her. He has a feeling he'll be spending most of his nights down here, regardless of if they get a cabin or if they're bunking with the crew.

"Dream?" a voice calls, loud enough for him to hear over the distantly familiar rush of waves against wood.

"Here, George," He calls back without pausing his brushing. He moves on from her mane, down her back to the spot she likes best and she stamps her hoof in approval, leaning into him and nearly knocking him over.

"Is Patches settling in?" George steps into view, pale in the orange glow of the lantern.

"She's doing okay." Dream gives her one last good scratch and sets the brush side, looking down at his cloak with amazement when he's done. Karl had even put an enchantment to counter *hair*.

"And her owner?" George checks in, side-stepping around Patches to stand next to him.

"He's doing okay, too." Dream shrugs. "Where are the others?"

"If I know them, they've gone for a roll in some hay of their own," George falls back onto the bales, crossing his ankles. "Sit with me."

"George, I'm *fine*."

“Okay?” George wrinkles up his nose, “Good job at being fine, I guess? Proud of you. Now sit down with me.”

Dream huffs, but he drops down next to George, drawing his knees up. He’s careful not to let the soles of his shoes touch Patches’ food.

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“Don’t call me that.” George pushes Dream down on the hay, leaning over him until all Dream can see is George in the firelight.

“You could have just said this is what you wanted.” Dream says with amusement, looking up at him. He lets his body relax, more than willing to be under George if that’s what George wants.

“I shouldn’t have to say. Every time I tell you to do something, it’s for a good reason, so you should just do it.” George says snobbily. Every time he brings that tone out, it makes Dream crack up because he remembers exactly which stuffy old nobleman George stole it from when they were kids; a man with more coin than brains and a lot of land toward the Crimson Forest, actually, who hadn’t known who George was when he’d caught George by the shoulder as he passed and said *Fetch me a greeter, boy, I’ve a meeting with the Royal Advisor at noon.*

Sapnap and Dream had muttered the phrase to George so often that George had eventually started to parrot it right back at them until just the tone had been enough to send Dream into near hysterics for years.

“I’m sorry,” He reaches up, brushes his knuckles along George’s cheek, feels the warmth of him. “I’ll listen better next time.”

“See that you do.” George sniffs haughtily and then flops down on him without mercy. Dream *oophs*, laughing through the pain of solid hay at his back and a whole adult man landing on his chest.

“Are *you* okay?” He asks, running his fingers through a loose curl at the base of George’s neck. His hair is growing out, longer than he’s ever allowed it before. It’s practically a bush of dark brown curls that rival Karl’s. Dream likes it.

“Annoyed.” George grunts.

“That’s fair,” Dream agrees. “It’s an annoying situation.”

“I want to punch everyone on this stupid boat.” George admits, turning his face so his head is tucked under Dream’s chin, “And then myself, for letting it happen. I don’t think we’ll find anything of use in the End. We should have chartered someone else and left for Kinoko.”

“It was Karl’s decision, in the end.” Dream looks up at the ceiling, watching the way the firelight plays on the wood. He’d done that a lot as a kid - and he’d dreamed of being right

here, too, holding George. Everything that's happened in the past, any pain or hardship - it's all led him to this moment, being able to hold George. That makes everything worth it.

"Karl makes dumb decisions," George sighs, breath warm against Dream's throat.

"Remember when he decided to make a stew with every edible mushroom he found? Rancid. Foul. I threw it up."

"You're the only one that was dumb enough to eat it."

"Sapnap ate it!"

"Sapnap put some in his mouth and spat it out as soon as Karl turned around."

"*Fucker.*"

"Smart."

"Shut up," George reaches up and blindly pokes at his face, nearly taking Dream's eye out before he turns his head and gets a finger jabbing into his temple and a mouthful of George's curls. "You're on my side, Sir Dream. Keep your head on straight here."

"Oh, so I can be Sir Dream, but you're definitely not Prince George?"

"Yes, what isn't processing? Should I say it slower? Change the words?"

"You're such a bitch."

"I could have you executed."

"Yeah, right," Dream giggles. "That whole castle liked me more than you. You'd have a riot by the time you sharpened a blade."

"I'd use a dull one, then." George tilts his head up, presses a kiss to Dream's Adam's apple. "I'd aim for right there. I'd make it quick, don't worry."

"Who would you have to order around, then?" Dream scoffs, letting his eyes close as George lays another dry kiss to his throat, tilting his chin up to bare more for George's ministrations.

"A whole castle."

"Who would you have to protect you?"

"Sapnap would be spared, as annoying as he can be."

"Who'd warm your bed?" Dream grins wider, George's kisses growing heavier with each answer, trailing down to his collarbone.

"I'd marry some prince or princess. We'd make royal little brats to keep the line going."

"Sounds like I'd be useless, then. You wouldn't need me, I suppose." Dream sighs the words, but he lets his eyes open when George catches his chin tilts Dream's face down so they can

look at each other.

“Don’t be silly, Dream.” George says, face serious. “Of course I would.”

“George,” Dream scoffs, flustered, but George gentles a thumb along his bottom lip and he goes silent, words stolen.

“In every world. Every journey.” George continues, soft. “Always, I’d need you. Idiot.”

“Idiot.” Dream echoes, practically voiceless, and kisses the pad of George’s thumb.

“I’m annoyed.” George repeats himself from earlier. “I hate this. I’m going to pull Puffy’s hair out and stuff it down Phil’s throat if they don’t stop dancing around our questions, the mad fucks. But I’m glad we’re all together this time, if we have to go on another stupid, bullshit journey.”

“I won’t be able to make buckets this time.” Dream warns, and he’s joking. He is. But, also... “I won’t be able to just...teleport us across the country, this time.”

“I don’t care,” George scoffs. “Whatever.”

“Whatever?” Dream cocks an eyebrow, nipping at George’s finger. George lets him, because he knows that Dream wouldn’t be able to bring himself to actually bite him, the brat.

“What,” George says with more emphasis, “*Ever*, Dream. What part of *I’m glad we’re all together this time* was confusing? Did I say I wanted XD?”

Dream winces.

“I...”

“Did I?”

“No.”

“Because I don’t.” George takes a deep breath. Dream feels his chest expanding against his.

Somewhere in the distance, he hears Patches huff, the shift of her hooves on wood.

“I miss XD, sometimes.” George continues. “I do. I loved him. Love him. But I have you, so. You’re worth that. Get it through your thick, stupidly handsome head, fool. You’re worth that. And more. This, even.” George motions around them, at the dark oak of the belly of the ship. “So whatever.”

“Whatever.” Dream repeats, looking up at George with wonder. Is this really the boy Dream saw, when he was so young? It seems impossible that he’s loved him for so long - well over a decade. A lifetime. It seems impossible that he’s loved him for so little a time - what is a decade in the face of how Dream loves him? How Dream’s heart beats for him? What is a second, an hour, a day, a year, a lifetime, in the face of how deeply Dream’s body and soul is owned by this silly boy, who stood in a garden at sunrise and put the blossoms to shame?

Nothing, that's what. Not a single thing.

"Come on," George leans down to kiss him properly, lips sliding together in well-known movements. If Dream's lips were made of wood, they long would have been worn to perfectly match the shape of George's; but, fortunately, he is flesh, and he gets to enjoy the warmth of a kiss in ways wood does not.

He's confused, distracted by the kiss and wanting much more, when George pulls away and then pushes himself to his knees and then to his feet.

"Hurry up, *Dream*," George draws, "We have to go find the others and figure out how we're going to do this."

"Do what?" Dream whines, making grabby hands at him. George rolls his eyes and extends a hand out, grabs Dream by the wrist so Dream can haul himself up. They stumble as the ship is hit by a sharp swell that sends it rocking and Dream automatically grabs for George, gets a hand behind his head so that it's Dream's knuckles that take the brunt when they slam into the wall of the ship instead of George's skull.

"Survive this trip." George says, looking up at him with wide, brown eyes. "Is your hand okay?"

"It's fine."

"Then take it off my arse before it isn't."

"You noticed?" Dream laughs and steps back, offering said hand to George and shaking the numbness out from the other, "What's wrong with the cabin?"

"Well," George sighs, accepting his offer. Their palms slide together as naturally as their lips do. "For one, it's not very big. For another, we're going to have some well irritating neighbors."

"Oh, no," Dream says, face dropping.

"Oh, yes." George confirms and Dream lets his shoulders fall, alone in the dark with George and Patches, no one else to tell on him for his obvious displeasure. Fuck.

They'd done a harried check post-sneak-away to an off-shoot room filled with boxes cushioned on beds of loose hay, but Quackity is still finding stray straw in his wings when the boys hunt him and Karl down.

Sapnap had disappeared with George and Dream to do gods know what, with their attention pulled in all sorts of directions, but Quackity needs to stay close to the edge of the ship. He can already tell that this won't be a pleasant trip for him, in more ways than one.

"You just have to find your sea legs," Karl soothes as he rubs Quackity's back and Quackity groans from where he's perched over the railing with his eyes squeezed shut. Leaving the Skeleton Estuary had been rough, rocking that had quickly taken Quackity's stomach with it

and what little he'd managed to eat that morning had quickly disappeared into the ocean. He's hoping that once they hit open water, it will be as calm as it had been earlier. Unpleasant, sure, but he'd been able to handle it. *This* is hell.

"This is the worst thing that's ever happened to me." Quackity wipes at his mouth after spitting a few more times and lets Karl pull him back to the deck, grabbing at him to steady himself as the ship once again shifts under foot.

"I know," Karl says sympathetically, "We're almost out, and then it's calm seas for a while. Come're, let's find a place to sit, yeah?"

Quackity nods miserably and lets Karl cart him away from the railing and up the stairs to the forecandle. A little more elevated, now, Quackity can at least stop staring at the rolling waves and take some deep breaths of salty air.

"Do you have any water?" He asks, voice small, and Karl shakes his head with regret.

"Not on me." Karl helps him settle on the ground, lean back against the railing that lets them peek back down to the main deck. With a flourish, Karl lays his cloak over Quackity and Quackity pulls it up greedily, desperate for the gentle warmth and calm that the cloak allows to sweep over him. It doesn't settle his stomach, but the comforting enchantment helps to focus him, opens up his lungs from the low-grade panic that had been settling in.

"I'll go get you some," Karl pets through his hair, fingers fond as they find a small, broken piece of straw and pluck it from the strands. "And let me dig through the enderchest. I know for a fact that I packed some tinctures that will help settle your stomach."

"Thank you," Quackity wipes at his mouth again, letting himself be whiny because it's just the two of them up here, most of the crew busy on the main deck or in the rigging, "Maybe find something that will knock me out, too, if you have it."

"I know something that might help with that," Karl wriggles his eyebrows and that, at least, makes Quackity giggle into his cloak.

"We tried that, smartass," he reminds him, "I'm still awake."

"Give me another chance, baby," Karl teases, leaning down to kiss his cheek, "I'll be right back, okay? Just wait here. Some water and some medicine will fix you up."

Karl stands up and disappears back down the stairs with one last look over his shoulder, which Quackity waves at until he's out of sight.

With Karl gone, Quackity lets himself wrap the cloak tight around his shoulders and pulls the hood up, burying himself in the familiar, comforting scent and hiding behind the enchantments. It feels nice, being surrounded by the eye-catching patterns and he lets his fingers travel across the messy, lovingly done stitching of the cloak as he waits, using the pattern to count along alongside his breathing. The ship lists to the left and his stomach flips and it's all he can do to cling to the railing for support and squeeze his eyes shut against the motion. He feels perilously close to heaving again.

“Uh.” A low voice echoes from down below, “You doin’ okay?”

Quackity’s stomach drops into his ankles.

“Fine,” He grits out, willing himself not to hurl. “I’m just fine.”

“No offense,” Techno laughs awkwardly, “But you don’t look like you’re doin’ fine. Can you move? That’s not the best position when the sea is like this.”

“I’m waiting for Karl,” Quackity says, as evenly as he can while he struggles to maintain control of his stomach and his heart rate, “Don’t worry about me.” He can hear his voice going pitched and almost panicked at the end and wills it to come back down again. “Just... Leave me alone. Before I puke on your shoes, ha.”

It’s a fake laugh, and they both know it. Technoblade just huffs but Quackity hears footsteps move away from him. It’s an immense relief, especially in the face of his stomach already rolling.

The sun feels nice, at least. He tries to get himself to relax, continues to count stitches until there is another noise from below.

“Quackity?” A voice calls, “Big Q! You okay, man?”

“Course he isn’t, look at him!”

“He *does* look sick.”

“Yeah, he’s sick, dumbass, I’ll bet he’s seasick, like Techno said,”

“Big Q isn’t *seasick*, only babies get seasick -”

“I’m not a baby!”

“He’s not a baby, Tommy, stop teasing him about that!”

“You’re just sticking up for him because you’re *engaged*, Tubbo, and frankly, that’s sort of fucked up, that, so -”

“Boys,” Quackity groans, their budding argument doing little to make him feel better, “Shut the fuck up, please.”

“Techno said you were probably seasick,” It’s Ranboo, Quackity quickly places, who’s talking as the three of them take his words as an invitation to approach. “Here, I’ve got some tablets on me that help.”

Quackity isn’t sure how he feels about Technoblade sending him help; debatable, considering who had arrived, but he can see his sentiment. His stomach lurches.

Quackity hears scrambling over wood, the steps creaking under weight, and then heavy *clunks*; he opens his eyes barely a crack, finds three shadowy figures settled around him.

“Hi, guys.” He grits out as the boat shifts again.

“Here,” one of the figures holds out an arm and Quackity blindly holds out a hand, feels a small satchel pressed to his palm, “Take one of those. It’ll be gross without water, sorry, but chew it up.”

“Karl’s bringing me some water,” Quackity says as he opens the satchel on touch alone and pops a tablet into his palm. He presses it to his tongue, pushes it between his back teeth and crushes it easily.

Immediately, a sour, dry dust chinks the inside of his mouth and he winces, but he continues to chew and chew and, miraculously, his stomach does start to settle, even as his tongue wants to wither in his mouth.

“Thank you,” He says, letting his shoulders relax now that he doesn’t feel so close to throwing up his whole stomach. “Fuck, this sucks.”

“I know.” Ranboo agrees, “I keep these on me all the time. They really help. Here, I’ve got plenty, you can have a few!”

“It’s okay,” Quackity forces a smile, wiping the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve and straightening up. He holds the satchel back out toward Ranboo, still working his jaw to chew the tablet. “Karl’s got some stuff, he’s bringing that, too.”

“Wow,” Tommy smirks, “Lap of luxury, huh, Mister Secretary? You’ve got servants, now!”

“Don’t call them servants, idiot,” Quackity snorts, finding himself smiling. “They’re attentive, is all.”

“Tommy’s just jealous.” Tubbo stage-whispers. “He hates love.”

“I do not *hate love* -”

“He hates marriages, too,” Ranboo shrugs, “It’s a whole thing.”

“I *don’t!*” Tommy yells, drowning the other two out, “I’m just *sick* of it. Doesn’t everyone get bored of being obsessed with *each other!*?”

Quackity pats Tommy’s knee, shifting so he’s sitting with his legs crossed instead of crumpled into a little ball of queasiness. “I dunno if I’d say we’re obsessed with each other.” He pauses, thinking. “Okay, not *that* obsessed.”

Tommy scoffs, crossing his arms and hunching his shoulders in. “Phil, Dream, these two, *you*. Be more like me and Techno and Wil, you guys. We don’t need *romance*, we have *adventures* and *friendship* and shit, no time for all this sappy bull!”

“It isn’t bull!” Tubbo says hotly, shooting an annoyed glance at Tommy from the corner of his eye, “Just because you don’t understand it doesn’t mean it isn’t good, okay? Can you lay off?”

Tommy puffs up, spine straightening, “No, I can’t just *lay off*, Tubbo, I’m getting really sick of third-wheeling here!”

“You’re third-wheeling yourself, Tommy! We’re getting married one day, it’s not the end of the world, and *you’re* the one that brings it up all the time!”

“They’ve been like this for weeks.” Ranboo whispers to Quackity as Tubbo and Tommy bicker, “I think it’s because we’re going to the End, so Phil’s especially...happy. Apparently he gets like this every time. It’s gonna be our first time going - Tubbo and I, I mean, so it’s cool to see him so excited, but it’s weird, too.”

Quackity hums, but he can’t quite understand what Ranboo is talking about. He’s familiar with Phil - he’d, well. He’d had a job to do and that job revolved around Phil’s family. He’d had tens of dinners with him and his kids, working his way into the group as best he could, and Phil had always tolerated him, placid and even-tempered unless he was telling his boys off.

The Phil that Quackity has seen the last two days hasn’t been particularly - different. Definitely not happier or more excited than before.

“Tommy’s feeling kind of left out, I think,” Ranboo drops his voice, making Quackity strain to hear him over Tubbo and Tommy practically yelling at each other. “The whole betrothal thing is a sore spot.”

“Oof.” Quackity says, not quite sure what to do with all the information he’s being given, “That’s rough.”

“It can be.” Ranboo sighs.

“Well, maybe if you two stopped *rubbing it in my face!*”

“What are you *talking about!*? ”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about, don’t act stupid -”

“Don’t call me *stupid* -”

“I *didn’t* call you stupid, stupid, I said you were *acting* stupid, so -”

“Boys,” Quackity raises his voice, cutting between Tubbo’s no-doubt acrid response, “Can we not?”

“He started it!” Tommy crosses his arms tighter across his chest and Quackity rolls his eyes at the response.

Prime. When he’d been their age, he’d been - well. Quackity doesn’t want to think about it. That was something he’d struggled with, back in the castle, when his job had meant he spent so much time with them, watching the way Phil and Wilbur and even Technoblade spoiled them. He’d been - and still is - jealous of them, in a way. When Quackity had been their age, he’d been with...with Schlatt. He’d done things he wasn’t proud of, and there were even

worse things he'd do in the future. When Quackity had been sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, he'd been a tool. A doll. A caged bird, set out to be touched and looked at as the people around him had willed it. He'd had no control of anything; he'd been a pretty face and a knife, a walking ego trip for the only person he'd trusted in the whole world. The idea that anyone would protect him like how these three were protected had been laughable. The idea that he'd have anyone love him the way they were loved had been something he'd only been able to dream of.

He doesn't want to think about what he'd been doing when he was their age; it had been a dark path, and one he knows that none of these three will ever have to walk. He'd felt so guilty, back then; that he'd been jealous of them, that he'd hated them, a little bit, for being so protected.

It doesn't hurt, anymore, he realizes. Sitting with them, hearing that their biggest struggles are just that Tommy feels left out because his two friends are betrothed and he isn't and Tubbo is sick of it - it doesn't make him ache for a life that he'd missed out on when a family he doesn't remember had left him behind. He's away from that dark path, and he doesn't hate them. He doesn't resent them. He has people now, too, that would do for him what Phil and Wilbur and Technoblade would do for them.

It's funny, he reflects. Karl is going to bring him water and medicine because his stomach hurts. He doesn't even doubt it, either. He knows, without a shadow of hesitation, that Karl will come back, with water and a tincture he'd made himself, just because Quackity had been ill, even though Karl had just recently discovered literally life-changing things about his origins.

That idea, in the face of thinking about where he'd been the last time he'd sat with these three like this, makes him blink rapidly.

"Oh, geez, sorry," Tommy says hurriedly, "Big Q, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, don't - I didn't mean to make you cry."

"Cry?" Quackity frowns, and then he feels it, a damp line on his face. He reaches up, brushes under his eye, finds that it's a bit wet. "Oh, fuck. No, it's okay! I'm not - I'm not upset. I'm just happy. Fuck."

"Happy we're fighting?" Tubbo says with confusion.

"No!" Quackity laughs, palming at his eyes until they're dry, "Just - happy to see you guys. It's been a long time, hasn't it? You're getting so tall, all of you. Except you, Tubbo."

"I'm taller than *you*!" Tubbo squawks, but he's smiling. "What the fuck, Quackity? I'm copping enough flack from the rest of my towering fucking family, I don't need it from you, too!"

"Sorry," Quackity snuffles and clears his throat, "I just. Wow. Time sure happens, huh? You're all growing up."

“Are you really okay?” Tommy leans closer, frowning, “You’ve never been much of a crier, Q.”

“People change.” Quackity says, his lungs expanding with fresh air. “Maybe I am now. I promise I’m okay. I don’t even feel sick anymore.”

“The tablets are basically magic.” Ranboo says, a little timid. “So we didn’t...upset you?”

“No.” Quackity assures him. “I wanted to see you guys, right? Tell me about what’s been goin’ on. You only write Dream, Tommy, I’m beginning to think you have a favorite.”

Tommy goes pink, stuttering, and Tubbo laughs.

“Dream told me to write him!” Tommy yells, perhaps too loudly, “You didn’t! I figured you wanted a bit of a break, is all!”

“Okay, fine, I want you to write me, then!” Quackity slaps at his knee, playful, “Maybe I wanna hear all the gossip around the world, *too*, kid!”

“I don’t send *gossip*!”

“He does.” Tubbo snorts. “Let me tell you about what we saw when we went to visit the Greater SMP last year, Big Q, it was heinous.”

“In a good way.” Ranboo adds on.

“It wasn’t.” Tommy mutters, but he settles in and Quackity follows suit, readying himself for a long story.

Half way through, Karl returns, bringing with him a full-to-bursting waterskin and a glass bottle of lemon-scented tincture.

“Am I interrupting?” He says with a smile when his head appears through the rails of the staircase, “Q?”

“No,” Quackity says, turning away to look at him. He smiles when he sees how the sunlight glints against Karl’s eyes, turning the silver nearly white. Trust Karl to have the whole color of his eyes change and still keep one of the most interesting things about them.

“Ewwww,” he hears in chorus and when he snaps back around, Tubbo and Tommy are leaning into each other and Ranboo is shaking his head at them in disappointment.

“What?” He flushes. “I told you he was bringing me medicine.”

“Speaking of,” Karl says, flopping to the ground without hesitation, joining their little circle, “I brought the lemon, but I found the lavender and the honey, too, so if you don’t want lemon, I’ll go get one of those. I should have brought them with me,” He bonks himself on his head. “Sorry. It took forever to find where we put all the water. We’re currently surrounded by the stuff and I still had to hold up three men and a sheep to track it down.”

“I’m sure they keep it under lock and key,” Quackity easily accepts the water and takes a sip. It’s cool and sweet on his tongue. He hadn’t realized how thirsty he was until he’s half-emptied the waterskin. “Thanks. You didn’t need to do all that.”

Karl waves him off, holding up the tincture. “Lemon?”

“My favorite,” Quackity says, only half joking, and accepts the bottle to take a few sips.

“Sips,” Karl reminds him needlessly, “It’ll do the opposite if you take too much.”

“I know, Karl.” Quackity scoffs, re-corking the bottle and handing it back. “Ranboo also gave me a tablet and it helped a lot.”

“Tablet?” Karl hums, turning to Ranboo, “Do you have an extra? I wonder if I could make some with the supplies I have...”

Tommy coughs as Ranboo silently shakes out a tablet and hands it over to Karl, who lifts part of his cloak and slips it into a hidden pocket before settling it back into place on Quackity’s knee.

“This is worse than Phil.” Tommy says into the quiet that settles around them.

“It’s cute.” Tubbo smiles. “You two like each other.”

“I sure hope so.” Quackity snorts, “I’d be really confused if we didn’t.”

“Like?” Karl puts a hand to his chest, “*Like*? Is that what you think? Don’t you see the hearts that appear above my head and in my eyes? Does my very being not betray the depth of my devotion?” Karl turns to Quackity, taking up his hand, much to Quackity’s amusement, while Tommy makes gagging noises in the background. “My light, my heart, my truest love, is that what you think? That I *like* you? The word buckles under what it tries to convey. I love you. The space between our palms now is too much to bear, even.”

“I know, Karl.” Quackity tries to press the smile back but he knows he fails, fingers curling into Karl’s.

“Do you?” Karl smiles, leaning down to kiss his knuckles. “Truly?”

“I do.” Quackity says, the skin under Karl’s lips tingling from the kiss, “You tell me daily.”

“I’ll make it twice daily. Hourly, even. At the hour, I’ll tell you. At the half-hour, I’ll tell Sapnap. That way, you’ll both know how ardent my affection is.”

“Do I have to do that one day?” Ranboo says carefully. “I don’t know if I could do that.”

“I’d throw up on you.” Tubbo wrinkles up his nose. “And then on me.”

“And then I’d throw up on you.” Tommy gags, “You two are *gross*. Does Sapnap do this, too?”

“No.” Quackity squeezes Karl’s hands. “It’s just Karl. He’s special.”

“That’s a word for it.” Ranboo clears his throat. “I see why he was so intense about saving you, now. You’re a...passionate dude, Karl.”

“For the people I love,” Karl doesn’t look away from Quackity for a long few seconds; when he breaks eye-contact, it’s like he gives Quackity permission to breathe again. He breathes in, the lemon on his tongue fresh and pleasing. His stomach settles as the tincture takes effect, the bitter taste of the tablet disappearing under water and lemon.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt your story, though,” Karl says to Tubbo, “Mind if I listen? I love a good tale.”

“You missed a lot of backstory,” Tommy says, “You’re going to be confused.”

“I don’t mind jumping in the middle of a good story,” Karl waves him off with a free hand, “I’ll catch up.”

“Well...” Tubbo exchanges a glance with Tommy and then Ranboo, “So, like I was saying -”

Tubbo dives back into his re-telling of their last trip to the Greater SMP and Quackity nods along, listening, and enjoying the calm as the sea settles and the boys bicker. Karl doesn’t let go of his hand and Quackity doesn’t act like he wants him to, their fingers tangled together.

The conversation drifts from their trip to other things they’ve been up to in the last while; Tommy regales them with stories of his training with Technoblade; Ranboo slowly opens up about his journal writing and all of the stories he’s collected, much to Karl’s unbridled enthusiasm; Tubbo chimes in once his story is done, backing up both of his friends in their tales. It’s nice, it’s calm, it’s exactly what Quackity needs after the stress of the last few days and the rough seasickness. When lunch rolls around, the boys get called away but don’t leave until they pull a promise from both of them to have dinner in the officers’ mess with them and Puffy; Quackity isn’t sure if the other three will want to join so he’s careful to talk around them.

“Not tonight,” Dream says when Quackity and Karl disappear into their own cabin - unfortunately close to where Phil and his brood are currently nested up. There’s a small broom closet between the rooms, at least, so they don’t share a wall, but they’ve all decided by silent majority to keep their voices low when they speak. “Maybe tomorrow?”

“I won’t make promises to them,” Quackity shrugs, “Take your time, man. We’ve got weeks.”

“Don’t remind me.” George groans, sitting on the bottom of one set of bunk beds.

Their cabin is only just barely bigger than the wagon they trundled to Pandora in; there are two bunk beds, one to each side of the room. They’re thin, Sapnap barely fits with his wide shoulders and Dream *doesn’t* fit, his legs hanging off the ends. Luckily for him, there’s a hammock hung along the back wall, thick and off-yellow, for him to sleep in. They have a table nailed to the center of the room so it doesn’t sway in the waves, but they’ve all agreed

to keep their things inside of the enderchest unless they're needed, and they've stored the enderchest under one of the bunks.

Quackity isn't looking forward to trying to sleep without the warmth of at least one of his lovers next to him, nor how uncomfortable it's going to be when they eventually give up and join each other. The beds are hard, the pillows flat, the blankets tattered from a lifetime on a ship.

Quackity will survive, though his back might not. It's just...

He misses home. In more ways than one, Quackity wants to return to the mansion with the others and just...get back to how things were. Happy and calm and healing, if not yet fully healed.

"Come on, guys," Karl clasps George's shoulder, rubs firmly, "Don't be so down. So what if we have to avoid a few people on a big boat for a few weeks? We can make this work. We've made it through way worse, haven't we?"

"Yeah." Dream smiles. Though Quackity can tell it's forced, he appreciates the effort and smiles back.

Their first day on the ship doesn't end in disaster. Karl and Quackity go to dinner with Sapnap while George and Dream disappear into the bowels of the ship to escape; there are no wild revelations or terribly awkward moments; Quackity ignores Technoblade and Wilbur, as always, and focuses on talking with Puffy so Sapnap doesn't have to; Karl easily parries any verbal blows Wilbur attempts to send their way and keeps Technoblade entertained when he joins the conversations, and Sapnap speaks to Phil and the boys. It's a success, as far as dinners with this group go, and Quackity will take it.

He only hopes the next few weeks stay as peaceful as this one.

Much to Dream's chagrin, he can't actually stay with Patches twenty-four hours a day. He climbs onto the deck sometime around the middle of the afternoon, feeling the sea roiling under the old wood, a familiar motion that lulls him and disquiets him in equal measure.

It's been a solid week since they left port and the sea has been kind to them. Clear skies, steady wind, waves that rock but don't threaten. When Dream had dreamt of the ocean as a young boy in Kinoko, it had been memories of gale storms that stole his vision from the rain and wind, the ship rocking so hard that he'd been half-sure that it would go under any minute. He'd missed it for a long, long time before the land had finally called to him and he'd accepted Kinoko for what it was - different, and better, because it had George and Sapnap.

Now, he wonders how he'd ever called this unfeeling blue his home. The ship is so similar to the one he'd grown up on that, at times, he finds himself taking turns that don't exist, looking for doors that do not fit into the woodwork of the *Michelle*. It's as if Puffy had had the *Raging Ram* renovated, re-built from plans she'd drawn by memory after years of being away. He isn't sure how old the *Michelle* is or when the *Raging Ram* had been retired, but he

recognizes the original turns in some parts of this ship enough to make the turns he doesn't recognize painful.

He spends most of his time below-deck, with Patches. She's taken to traveling as well as she takes to most things, with a calmness that Dream appreciates and a patience for his talking that he can attribute only to her inability to truly understand his aimless babbling. He brushes her daily, brings her treats snuck from the kitchens and their own small reserves of supplies, sugar cubes and apple slices and handfuls of hay from different parts of the ship, just in case they taste different and better.

Dream may be going crazy. He's sure that George thinks so, even if he won't admit it. He's sure that Sapnap thinks so, because he *has* admitted it, though he told Dream he wouldn't blame him for losing his marbles on this ship. He's been avoiding Puffy, for the most part, but he knows it won't last for much longer. She's never been the most patient of women, and that he's managed to go so long without her hunting him down says a lot about her own state right now.

He doesn't want to think about that right now, though. He's actually come up for a reason; George had said he'd be back an hour ago and hadn't returned so Dream is looking for him. He'd also hoped to drag Sapnap or maybe Karl or Quackity down to Patches' stall, too, to pass the time with some dice or something.

Instead, upon climbing through the hatch to the second level of the ship, he finds Foolish.

"Oh." Foolish pauses mid-stride, green eyes zeroing in on him and then going wide. "Dream. You're...out."

"I'm looking for George." He says dumbly.

Dream...doesn't know how to feel about Foolish, or what to do with him. Foolish had seemed very interested in him, in getting to know him - but he also picked up on Dream's disinterest quickly and had dropped it without hesitation. Dream doesn't hate the guy but, at the same time, he knows that if things had played out differently, if Dream had stayed on the sea with Puffy, *he'd* be where Foolish is. He'd be first mate. He'd know this crew, this ship, he'd know the woman that's supposed to be *his family*.

Dream doesn't want that life, this life - but Foolish reminds him that he's lost it, even if he gained more in the process.

"Everyone's been pulled into preparations. There's a storm coming tonight." Foolish says. As if to prove his words, a slow, distant roll of thunder growls. Dream looks up at the ceiling, knowing that those missing rough waters he'd dreamt about as a child have finally found them.

"No one came to get me." Dream frowns, turning back to him, "Do you still need help?"

"We figured you'd keep your horse calm," Foolish shrugs, "Your friends have just been securing cargo. I have a few more of these," Foolish re-adjusts his grip on two crates stacked against his chest, "To move to the crewmen quarters, if you're looking to help."

Dream nods, motioning for the crates, and Foolish hands them off.

He made it look easy, Dream realizes, as the crates nearly tip him over until he re-centers his body, adjusting his grip on the bottom one.

“Too heavy?” Foolish asks, another peal of thunder echoing his question.

“No,” Dream grunts and heads off in the direction of where he thinks the crewmen quarters are.

The stairs are a bit of trouble, but he manages to shoulder the hatch open, and push his way through, fresh air washing over him along with the smell of oncoming rain.

On the main deck, he actually hears Puffy directing the crew; he sees crewmen in the rigging, some in the sails, another in the crow’s nest way above. Yet others are hurrying around the deck, rolling barrels Dream remembers seeing above-deck the last time he was up or tying ropes across bigger cargo that can’t be moved.

He makes it onto a slowly shifting deck to the crewmen quarters, finds a stack of similar-looking crates and sets his haul down, fingers numb from the weight he’d put on them.

The skies are a deep gray when he is finally able to look at them upon leaving the crewman quarters; thick, dangerous clouds drift above them, hanging heavy with rain soon to pelt the ship.

“Dream!” He hears and his eyes snap to the right, finding Tommy and Tubbo yanking ineffectively at a rope as it pulls them ever-closer to the rails.

He catches them, luckily, and lets Tubbo lead them as he pulls against whatever weight they’d been fighting. He and Tommy hold the rope in place as Tubbo gets it tied tight around its post, but Dream doesn’t let go until Tommy does.

“What was that?” Dream asks, raising his voice against the wind as it picks up, icy-cold in a way he’s no longer familiar with after years in the Nether and the mild Badlands.

“Lifeline,” Tubbo says, face pale, eyes bright and manic.

“You’re tying lifelines!?”

“Mine,” Someone grunts as she climbs over the railing, “Good job, lads, that would have been quite the dunk.”

“No problem,” Tommy says faintly, and then she’s gone.

“Are you guys okay?” Dream looks them both over, “Where’s Phil?”

“We’re fine!” Tommy says, fingers curling tight into Dream’s sleeve, “This is incredible! The adrenaline rush, *woooo!*”

The ship shifts, tilting harder, and the three of them stumble into the rails. Tommy goes suddenly green and, still clinging frantically to Dream's wrist, leans over the side to hurl his guts out.

"Oh, okay," Dream says.

"Come on, Tommy, let's go find Ranboo and get something for...this," Tubbo rubs Tommy's back until Tommy stops gagging and stands up, not quite straight but doing his best as the swaying only gets worse.

"Get to your room," Dream corrects their plan, "Ranboo will join you soon, if he isn't already there. This wind isn't safe, and neither of you have a lifeline."

"It's fine," Tommy scoffs, and then covers his mouth with his palm.

"You don't, either," Tubbo points out, frowning, "It isn't safe for you."

"Dream could tie a lifeline with his eyes closed!" A familiar voice laughs, and then Puffy is there; she barely reaches his shoulders, but the way she holds herself, the way she barely seems to move at all as the ship tilts and shudders underfoot, makes Dream feel all of two feet tall.

"He's got the sea in his blood," She boasts, as if Dream has touched a ship since he was nine, "A little rain won't be the end of him. Off you go, boys, I've sent your friends to their cabin to take cover. My crew and I will take care of this," Puffy clasps Dream's shoulder, shaking firmly. "You're in good hands."

Tubbo nods carefully as the first, gentle mist of rain begins to fall, and he totes Tommy away without another word. Dream watches them until they disappear below deck and then turns to Puffy, stomach flipping when he realizes she's watching him back.

The rain is cold where it kisses his hair and skin. He focuses on that to stop himself from drifting away. He clutches his cloak tighter around himself and the cool, comforting embrace helps him keep his breathing even.

"You're out just in time." Puffy smiles as she looks him over, "You always were able to sense these things. I couldn't keep you from the rigging to save my life or your own."

"I was looking for George." Dream says carefully. "I didn't realize. That it was going to storm, I mean."

He sees the disappointment flash across her face as brightly as the lightning that streaks through the clouds.

"Ah, the prince." Puffy brings her smile back again, the disappointment subsiding in her eyes as easily as a sandcastle under waves, "He and Sapnap's boys were snagged to help belt down cargo."

"He doesn't like to be called that." Dream says, looking away from her to glance around, "None of them are up here, right? It's dangerous."

“No,” Puffy laughs, “I’m experienced enough to know that inexperience is what gets people killed.”

“And Sapnap?” Dream looks around, “He’s below, too?”

“They were adamant that he stay out of the rain,” Puffy says, and her tone tells him what she thinks of that.

“It makes him sick.” Dream says neutrally. “You might have forgotten.”

“I remembered,” Puffy waves him off, turning to check the rope Tubbo had tied. “It was just a bit funny, is all. Two string beans and a tiny avian, pushing a whole fire demon down the stairs.”

“They’re stronger than they look.” Dream says, trying to keep his voice from sounding defensive. “They -”

“Relax, kid,” She interrupts, gathering her hair up as it begins to grow heavy from the rain increasing, “I’m just kidding. No harm meant. Besides, I’m more interested in talking with you. Can you man the helm until Foolish gets back up here?”

“Man the...?” Dream blinks in confusion, “I don’t know how to do that, Puffy.”

“Of course you know!” Puffy giggles like she thinks he’s joking, “I taught you myself, duckling!”

“When I was *eight*,” Dream stares, incredulous, “I haven’t - no. I can’t, I’m sorry.”

“Come on, Dream,” She steps up onto the railing, grabbing tight to a taut net for balance, “Live a little! You’ve been on land too long, but a few minutes in my crew manning the ship and you’ll be right back at home!”

“Home.” Dream says, working his jaw against the tension in his body. “I was just coming to look for my friends. I’ll leave things up here to you.”

“Dream,” Puffy turns on the railing, staring down at him. The rain falls heavier. Behind her, lightning strikes and, barely a second later, thunder booms loud enough that Dream flinches. Puffy doesn’t, her eyes wide and bright and locked in.

Dream doesn’t have anything left to say, so he turns away, ready to escape the rain and those judging eyes. Whatever is happening on this deck, it’s not meant for him. Not anymore.

“I didn’t realize Kinoko would instill fear in you.” Puffy says, disappointment plain in her voice.

Dream freezes, blood running colder than the rain.

“Are you calling me a coward?” He asks, turning back around.

“No.” Puffy scoffs. “You’re my duckling, and I’d never raise a coward. But I think Kinoko took something from you. The way you are now, it’s not like how you were when I last saw you. You’re smaller. You flinch.”

“I’m not a stupid kid anymore.” Dream draws himself up. “I grew up, Puffy. Of course I’m scared of things, I’m not a *fool*. I’m not putting a whole ship in danger just because you think I should be able to steer it.”

“You know how to steer a ship.”

“I *don’t*.” Dream argues. “It’s been well over a decade since I was even *on* a ship!”

“It’s in your blood, Dream, you -”

“No, it isn’t!” Dream snaps, cutting her off, “I wasn’t born in the fucking seas, Puffy! You found me half buried in a landslide on the outskirts of an abandoned village! I’m as far from having any of this *in me* as they come! My first name was *Clay*, for fuck’s sake!”

“You were *raised* here.” Puffy motions to the sea, waves growing behind her, “She doesn’t care where you were born, Dream, only that you accept her call!”

“No,” Dream shakes his head, his heart rate increasing as his emotions swell, “I was raised in Kinoko. I’ve spent over half my life in *Kinoko*. I’m a *knight*, not a sailor. You made sure of that.”

“You’re both.”

“I’m really not.”

“Dream?” A voice cuts in, familiar and welcome against the tension rising rapidly between him and his - Puffy.

George has his hood up against the downpour, arms spread wide for balance as he wobbles across the deck.

“Dream, what are you still doing up here!? We need to get below!”

“I’m -” Dream starts to say, turning his back to Puffy, but her voice is loud and commanding when she speaks over him.

“Dream is part of this crew. He belongs up here. Get below deck, Your Highness, and he’ll be returned to you when the duties are done.”

“Part of the crew?” George says, bewildered, “Since when? Dream, you can sail?”

“Since the moment I first built it, he’s been part of this crew.” Puffy’s voice rises, “He’s always got a place here!”

“What are you talking about?” George furrows his brow, “Are you learning? This is a bit of a dangerous first day!”

“No!” Dream denies, “I’m not -”

“Of course you are!” Puffy jumps from the railing, letting go of the net, “You will *always* have a home here, if you ever want to come back!”

“Home?” Dream can’t help but scoff, “Are you... Are you serious?”

“Yes, I’m serious! The *Michelle* would welcome you. I would welcome you!”

“You *left* me!” Dream practically spits, “Are you insane!? You *left me behind* and now you’re telling me that this place could be some *home* for me!?”

“I did *not* leave you behind!” Puffy puts a hand to her chest as if Dream has stabbed her, eyes narrowed in a glare, “I had to go, and you had to stay. I made sure you were well-cared-for and safe before I came back to the sea!”

“Is that what you did?” Dream laughs, incredulous, “You really think pawning me off on Sappnap’s parents and the knighthood before you fucked off means it was fine!?”

“This isn’t the time or place for this,” George reaches them, taking Dream’s hand, “Talk about it after the storm.”

“This doesn’t concern you, Prince George.” Puffy says rudely, “Get below deck before this wind snatches you up and takes you so far out even the stars won’t be able to lead us to you. Captain’s orders.”

“*Stop* calling him that.” Dream grips George’s hand tighter. “He’s told you he doesn’t like it, I’ve told you to stop!”

“Oh, what does it matter!? He’s still a prince, whether he has a kingdom or not!” Puffy snaps, the first edges of anger beginning to color her words, adding fuel to the fire in Dream’s belly.

How dare she be angry? How dare she be cruel to the man who has given Dream everything, both before and after she’d left him? How dare she stand in front of him and offer him *home*, as if she hadn’t been the one to rip the very idea of what home was out from under him with a single letter?

“We’ll continue this discussion later.” George says formally. “Good luck with the storm, Captain. I’ll be taking my knight.”

“He’s *my* crewman before he’s your knight.” Puffy says tightly, “He belongs out here.”

“No, I don’t.” Dream steps between the two of them, blocking George from her sight. “I’m not part of your crew. I’m not part of your anything. You left me! I haven’t heard from you in fucking years! It’s been over a decade since I’ve even *seen* you! I’m George’s knight before I’m *anything else*, let alone a crewman on a ship I’ve never even heard of before!”

“Dream, that isn’t fair,” She starts, reaching for him, but he steps back, far from her grasp. The idea of her touch makes his skin burn as if a wither skeleton has shot him.

“Good luck with the storm.” He repeats, firm, and turns his back on her.

“Dream!”

He doesn’t answer, and George follows his lead, holding his hand tight, tight, tight against the urge to just - drift away from the intensity of it all. Dream feels sick.

They pass Foolish as they return below deck, two more crates on his shoulders.

“Heeey, bud, thanks for -” he trails off sharply, “...the help?”

“No problem.” Dream says, voice blank. “Puffy needs you at the helm.”

“Got it.” Foolish hesitates, “You gonna ride this baby out down here?”

“Where I belong.” Dream answers simply.

“...yeah, okay, guy,” Foolish looks them both over and then nods sharply, “Don’t worry. We’ll take care of everything.”

Dream doesn’t answer and neither does George. They watch Foolish disappear up the stairs, another angry crack of thunder echoing down to them.

“Let’s go to the room.” George says.

“I want to see Patches.” Dream answers. “She’ll be scared.”

“Okay.” George squeezes his hand, “Then we’ll get changed first, and then we’ll go see Patches.”

Dream doesn’t want to argue. He’s all fought out, even just that brief exchange of words with Puffy hollowing him to his core. He nods, and then ducks down and puts his face in George’s hair, breathing in shakily on a hitching sob that he tries desperately to hold in. George loops an arm around his waist, hugs him close. It’s all Dream can do to not break apart in his arms. He clings and George lets him, and it’s an acceptance that Dream so desperately needs and that George has always so readily given. Dream thanks every god that is listening for this, for having this, if he has nothing else in the world.

The *Michelle* sways angrily against the violence of the ocean in a thunderstorm.

Chapter End Notes

please don't be mad at puffy, no one in this family has good emotional intelligence

also acearo!tommy my beloved

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

it's my birthday so hannah let me post my faviroute chapter two days early. Enjoy :D

Legit though, this time last year we hadn't even concieved the idea of scarecrow, and in a year we've written so much and had so much wonderful fanart and built such a beautiful community in our discord and it just. means a lot. The greatest present was you guys, dear readers. <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The storm blows over by the next morning, but the aftermath of what its winds bring to the *Michelle* does not.

Sapnap isn't happy about it. He'd only been stopped from going after Puffy to start a new fight, rain be damned, because he'd had the others to hold him back, and Dream had needed him, even if he hadn't admitted it.

A full forty-eight hours have passed and Sapnap can still cut the tension with a blunt butter knife. Dream hasn't left Patches' stall since the storm, and Puffy is simply glancing over George without a word, royal address or not, in his direction.

The first twelve hours, George and him had spent the night with Dream and Patches, and then Quackity and Karl had taken a shift with Dream while George and Sapnap had done their best to keep Phil's youngest three children entertained so they'd leave Dream alone.

Last night, they'd abandoned the cabin and the five of them had slept squished together in Patches' stall, near silent except for Dream's whispered orders for them to go back to their beds and Karl's loud insistence that he'd pick hay over those damned wood cots any day.

George was the only one to actually witness the fight, but the rest of Puffy's crew had given them a wide berth all the same; even Foolish had taken to avoiding Sapnap's eye and tiptoeing around them.

Sapnap doesn't know if Puffy regrets what she said. He'd just barely dragged the full story out of Dream - and he still can't be sure that Dream had told the entire truth, the fucker - but even if he hadn't, what he *had* admitted to made Sapnap's blood boil. Even if she was contrite, Sapnap didn't actually give a fuck. He'd warned her away from the direction of the bottom deck a time or two by glare alone, and she'd seemed to get the hint plenty because she'd let Dream be the last two days, much as she *should have done* the entire gods damned trip, if anyone asked Sapnap.

If Sapnap is pissed, though, then George is the sort of angry that has just gone *cold*. It's rare that he's pushed this far - Sapnap has only seen it a few times, and it's never been directed at him. The fact that Puffy hadn't turned to a block of ice under his imperious stare would have impressed Sapnap, if he hadn't been hoping she would. It reminds Sapnap of the Queen, when George gets like this.

Part of him aches that Puffy's become *this* to him, to them all. He doesn't know what to think of her. He knows exactly how to *feel* about her; he's pissed as hell and all his hackles are up, the urge to stand in front of Dream until this entire trip is over is almost overwhelming. But what to *think* of her? He doesn't know how he's supposed to reconcile the image he had of her with how he sees her now.

As a kid, he'd always looked up to Puffy; she'd been a brave adventurer, with tales from all over the world and skills that he'd never even realized were things he could *learn* before he'd met her, and she'd been the only person who knew Dream as well as, if not better than he did. She was captain of the guard, the person he and Dream reported to throughout their childhood. She'd taught him how to hold a sword, taught him to block, taught him how to navigate with a compass when Dream could do it with ease and he still struggled. He had memories of all the times she'd snuck him and Dream out of the barracks to take them away from Kinoko proper and introduce them to the wider world. He distinctly remembers the first time a practice sword had splintered and broken skin and he'd been young and *cried* until she'd settled on her knees and looked his split flesh over and blown on it until the sting had passed.

She hadn't been to him what she was to Dream, and she hadn't always been around as much as his actual parents had been, with all the duties that being the captain of the guard entailed, but Sapnap had still *cared*. Still loved her, had grieved when he'd found out she'd left, had *missed* her.

More importantly, though, and what he'd hated her for as a child, was that he had hurt in sympathy with Dream when she left. Dream had been *devastated*. It had been weeks before George had dragged so much as a smile from him after he'd read that damned letter.

She can't expect him to be the same after *that*. After she'd just *left* him, with a fucking letter in the night, like the coward she'd accused Dream of being.

She's not the same, Sapnap knows. She might have seemed so at first glance, with the same hat and the same coat and the same smile, but she isn't. For one, she's smaller. Smaller even than Sapnap, which is saying something when his growth spurt looked like nothing at all next to Dream, who shot up like a string bean in the spring, or even George, who is unfortunately taller than him by just enough for it to count. She's traded her knightly sword for a cutlass, and her hat and coat have faded in the sunlight, with more patches sewn into them than Sapnap remembers.

Her eyes are different. They're brighter, now, than he'd ever seen them in Kinoko - more alive, maybe. But he doesn't like the way she *looks* at his friends; when she sees Karl, her face pinches like he's dying, and she looks at Dream like her heart is breaking. She doesn't deserve to feel like that, when she's the one who broke him first.

That's what really makes his breath start to shake and his skin to begin steaming - the fucking *audacity* of her words, of what she'd tried to do. She can't just waltz back into Dream's life like the years apart never happened, like Dream hadn't nearly died, and expect him, or any of them, to be the same. She can't expect to have some sort of claim over him when she'd left him behind like a gift to the royal family.

If things weren't so complicated, whether he'd missed her once or not, loved her once or not, Sapnap wouldn't have hesitated to leave Puffy and this ship forever, if that was what Dream wanted. She'd abandoned Dream, turned her back on the person that loved her most to go back out to sea - whether because of a deal she'd made in her youth with some malevolent entity from another dimension or because of her own wanderlust, Sapnap couldn't give less of a shit.

But things are complicated, aren't they? Puffy has crow's feet and laughter lines and is a reminder that Karl still has a *chance*. Whatever's happening with him, they can stop it. They can save him.

They need *her* to save him, at least for a little while longer. For Karl, Sapnap will swallow the vitriol and the fight and the near-decade of pent-up fury that he'd promised himself he'd spit at her feet if he ever saw her again. It's not a choice he's happy to make and it tears him apart, the idea that he has to place his lover over his brother in this.

Dream hasn't asked him to make that call, yet, though. In all honesty, Sapnap doesn't think he will. Dream cares for Karl and Dream has always put the people he loves before his own comfort; for Karl, Dream will be a ship in a storm, battered by the rain and lightning but ultimately staying afloat until the storm has passed. Sometimes, weathering a storm looks like banishing one's self to the bowels of a ship with a comfort horse, though, and Sapnap respects that.

He also respects and appreciates that George has made the decision to simply bite his tongue instead of acknowledging Puffy in an attempt to keep his promise to Dream. Sapnap will gratefully take their sacrifices, because he knows that they're doing it for Sapnap and his beloved. In return, he'll face the crew and Puffy while they do what they can to make it through this. Sapnap has always respected and admired that fortitude in his friends and he strives to embody it now, as he bears the burden of biting back his own frustration.

And it's this burden that finds him the only one of them on the deck when Foolish spots the other ship.

The day is clear, though especially still, when a whistle sounds sharp and high, and then the first mate slides down the rigging, no smile on his usually cheery face.

"Puffy!" He calls to the woman at the helm, "Puffy, we've got incoming, portside. Red flag. I couldn't make out the detailing."

"*Shit*," Puffy says, "Did they see us?"

"Oh, man, for super sure." Foolish replies, serious, "The wind isn't picking up enough for us to dip and they're smaller than us, anyways. They'd catch up, no doubt about it. I'd say

we've got less than ten minutes, max."

"Damn. Get the passengers down below," Puffy says, "Especially the kids. And tell Philza we may need his blade."

"Puffy!" Sapnap shouts up. Her head immediately snaps to him, and the expression on her face is inscrutable. "Is there trouble?"

"We're about to have some... uninvited guests." She replies, handing off the helm to Foolish and striding down the steps, "It's nothing we haven't seen before. Stay down in your cabin with your people, Sapnap."

"Please," Sapnap scoffs, "You trained me yourself. I'm sure your crew is capable enough, but I was born for this. *We* were."

Puffy looks him up and down for a few long moments.

"It would be stupid not to use who we have," she says, finally, "It seems we need a knight after all."

"Absolutely the fuck not," Sapnap says, strapping on the leather armor he'd packed in the enderchest, "Get the hell below deck, batten down the hatches and stay with Patches and the kids."

"*Excuse* me? I'm not *helpless* -"

"We're not *children*, Sapnap, I'll kick your ass right now -"

Both Quackity and Karl protest at once, Quackity gripping onto the railing of the stern, Karl's hair whipping in the wind. There's shouts from behind him, preparations being made. He can see Quackity's eyes flicker to the side as the smaller ship gets closer and closer. He can see how Quackity grips tight to Karl's hand, how Karl does the same in return. How neither of them want to let him go. He forces himself to take a deep breath. Schlong sits at his side, already pulsing at the chance to sing for him.

"I know that." Sapnap says, "I know you're not helpless, and I know you aren't kids, but this is more than just people chasing us down. At least when we were on the run they wanted to take us alive; these guys aren't fucking around. I can protect you best if I know you're already safe."

"We'll go crazy down there," Karl argues, "We can't see you, we'd just hear fighting. We don't know if you're okay, or if George and Dream are okay, are you insane? We're not sitting below deck, end of discussion. We're going to be up here to watch your back and protect you!"

"Isn't that my job?"

"As hot as it is when you do it, *no*." Quackity says, pressing his forehead to Sapnap's and resting them against each other. "Together, remember?"

Sapnap takes a moment to just breathe in that space, where it's just the three of them and nothing else. He pulls Karl in, his forehead to Sapnap's temple, buries his hand in curls damp with sea air, lets the other rest on the back of Quackity's neck.

"Trust me," he says between them, "Trust me when I say that I will be *fine*. Dream will have my back. Let me do what I do best - protect the people I care about."

He presses a soft kiss to Quackity's forehead, presses another between Karl's pale eyes, frustrated in the moonlight of his pupils.

"I'm so mad I don't have any fucking supplies." Karl curses, "If I had my fucking potions, gods *damn* it -"

"Okay," Quackity gives in, at least, "Okay, we'll -"

Whatever he is about to say is cut off by the sound of splintering wood. They jump, Sapnap drawing Schlong on pure instinct, and he spins around with his heart climbing into his throat.

"Hooks!" Foolish shouts, as similar sounds echo down the ship, each accompanied by a wickedly sharp grappling hook, already pulled taut along the railings of the *Michelle*, "Cut them, quick!"

There's a distant shout of something in the distance, and Sapnap registers it a second before Puffy does.

"*Get down!*" Someone screams as Karl yanks him and Quackity down to the deck.

Behind them, the stern explodes into splinters of wood, and his nose fills with the smell of gunpowder and whiskey.

Out of the corner of his eyes, across the rest of the ship, he sees bodies blown back, wood buckling under the sudden onslaught of cannon fire. *Fuck*. This is a merchant ship, for hauling cargo and passengers; it has good fighters but that's it. Little heavy artillery, the only long range weapon they have is possibly a couple cannons and George with a bow.

Still, he'd take George and a bow over most anyone else on this ship.

"Get below deck," he says one more time as he scrambles up, Schlong tight and warm in his grip.

"Boarding!" Someone shouts as the first enemy crewman swings onto the *Michelle*, four others quick to follow.

The ship that's now attacking them isn't as big as the *Michelle*, but it's longer and, if Sapnap had to guess, has a bigger, rowdier crew than the relatively sedate group of thirty or so that Puffy had brought along on this voyage. Those that board do so with loud war cries and raised weapons at the ready as they land on deck.

Sapnap looks around until he finds Dream and George, needing to know where they are and what their situation is - George has taken up by the helm with his bow drawn and already

releasing arrows into the boarding enemies, focused on each target; Dream guards his back, Nightmare bloody as Dream shoves a pirate off the blade.

Sapnap can't quite make it over there, determined not to leave the hatch to below deck unguarded; but he's close enough to hear a call or get help of his own, and that will do.

His muscles pull as he positions himself properly, his first opponent dropping only feet in front of him from the roped sky.

"Wrong ship, buddy," he says, and Schlong sings as it bites into flesh, its first proper taste of battle since their fight with Schlatt. The hilt is hot, trusting in his grip, and Sapnap *feels* how pleased it is to be in the thick of it again, a battle melody long missed by a weapon forged for exactly this purpose.

The pirate doesn't last long, not against Sapnap on a mission.

Sapnap doesn't have time to think; he just moves to the next body and cuts it down with little mercy. He's careful, at least, to not leave his self-assigned post, but he keeps his eye on the rest of the deck, trying to stay aware.

George runs out of arrows before too long, though Sapnap is sure that he made each one of them count; one of Puffy's crew, a girl perhaps too young to be on deck for a fight such as this, abandons her own skirmishes to collect arrows for him, dodging and picking through the battles to yank shafts from bodies and collect discarded quivers to rush to him. Dream has moved away from guarding the stairs of the forecandle, locked in a small crowd of pirates that Sapnap vaguely worries might grow to overwhelm him until they start dropping as George is re-armed. Flashes of pink bring him to Techno, working his way through the swaths of enemies with even less hesitation than Sapnap, clothes already stained red with spilled life.

In the rigging, he sees Puffy and Foolish both entrapped within their own fights; Puffy exchanging blows with a figure twice her size, Foolish simply picking people up and hurling them off the *Michelle* with bellows of rage. Toward the back of the ship, Sapnap sees Philza, sword in hand and wings tucked in, looking focused as he cuts down those who come for him.

"Sap!" He hears George's voice in warning, "Down!"

Sapnap drops without hesitation, an arrow whizzing through where his head had been just seconds before, and he hears a sharp cry. He turns, Schlong swinging, and finishes the pirate off with a thrust that embeds Schlong in his gut.

"Back!" Dream calls and Sapnap lets his feet spin, dances out of the way as a cutlass tries to cleave him from behind; Schlong feels almost delicate as he swings the blade, the deadly edge meeting yet more flesh.

The fighting goes on for what feels like hours, the smell of whiskey and gunpowder and salt and fear, the ship shaking under the weight of all the war. Sapnap is good, and his movements are practiced, but his muscles are unfortunately still learning and it's been a long time since he's had a proper spar, let alone a fight. He's protecting a vulnerable part of the ship, and he's

being targeted. For every one pirate he brings down, two more appear in their place, and Sapnap is forced back one step, and then another, more quickly than he's willing to admit aloud.

"Dream!" He calls when he feels the bite of a blade glance along the leather armor across his side, "Assistance, please, *fuck* -"

An opponent comes out of *nowhere* to his right and Sapnap lifts Schlong to block, the impact sending him stumbling back. He hits the railing before he gets his feet under him, tilting back dangerously, Schlong flying from his grip and skittering across the deck.

"Ooooh, *shit*," he teeters, stomach dropping, a sick feeling of *falling* beginning to sink into his limbs - and then a hand firmly grabs him by the collar and *yanks*.

He falls forward, back onto deck, with a scream.

"Shut up, shut up, it's me!" Quackity yells, "Idiot! Fucking *stupid*, foolish, idiotic *bastard*, do you think you would survive a dip in the fucking *ocean*, are you *crazy*!?"

"What are you doing up here?" Sapnap pants, looking around for Schlong and finding it feet away, lost in the scuffle of the fight.

"Saving you!"

"It isn't safe -"

"Watch out!" Karl yells and Sapnap sees the guy who'd nearly sent him into the ocean rushing them with his cutlass raised, eyes focused on Sapnap - he also sees Karl fully barrel into the man from behind, sending him into the railing much as Sapnap had done.

Instead of grabbing the man's clothes, Karl shoves him over the edge and sends him falling overboard with a shriek.

"I should have packed my potions," Karl laments, looking down at them both with annoyed anxiousness. Sapnap feels a jolt of fright upon seeing Karl's eyes, rimmed bright red with what he at first thinks is blood - but his heart calms as he realizes that it isn't. Instead, Karl's eyes are just - dimly reflecting a red glow he's never seen before.

Now isn't the time to explore the new change, though. There's still a battle going on, and there's no way that the two of them are going to be able to get below deck with everything happening.

"Stay behind me," He says, hauling himself up, "Keep each other safe and watch my back, okay?"

"That's what we've been trying to do," Quackity hobbles to his feet with Sapnap's help and Sapnap grins at him, adrenaline rushing through his veins and making him almost giddy.

This is how a fight should make him feel - even the near-death experience rolls off of him, and the tiredness of his muscles is but an afterthought. This is his element, where he doesn't

question or second-guess.

“Stop mooning at me like that.” Quackity snaps, flushing pink, “You’re so fucking weird, Sapnap, go fight something!”

“We’ll stay safe,” Karl promises, and Sapnap believes him. He looks them both over, just to be sure, and then turns back to where he last saw Schlong.

His sword’s been kicked farther away, back toward Dream, who, to be fair, has made his way to where Sapnap *had* been when he called for help. Schlong lays on the deck close to where he’s dancing with three pirates at once and Sapnap practically hears it calling to him. He needs to get it back.

Dream is surrounded; blocking a cutlass, dodging a lethal looking dagger, lashing out at another with a fierce boot to the groin, he fights with a near-feral energy that Sapnap feeds off of. He uses Dream’s determination to bolster his own, convince his aching arms to hold out for longer, his tired legs to keep going. Dream glances at him as he parries a blade and Sapnap sees when he notices Schlong’s position because Dream wrinkles up his nose and Sapnap flips him the bird.

“Lose something?” Dream calls, voice casual despite the strain of his position.

“Nope,” Sapnap flexes his hands and loosens up his shoulders, “I just needed my hands free for this!”

With no sword and few other options, Sapnap hunkers down and throws himself bodily into the largest of Dream’s opponents, a man brawnier than even Techno’s hulking frame.

He goes down and Sapnap takes advantage of the surprise, rears back and brings his fist down on the man’s face hard enough to send him flat again when he starts to sit up. He gets a hard knock against his ribs when the pirate swings his fist, but he’s obviously knocked the sense out of him and the blow is glancing and ultimately useless as Sapnap pulls back and launches another punch that sends the man into unconsciousness on the deck. Sapnap stands, turns, and watches the woman that had been sneaking behind him drop with a pained cry as an arrow lodges itself in her gut; George isn’t even looking at him when he spins to find him, busy aiming high to help Puffy and the crew in the rigging above.

“*Shit*,” He hears Dream say behind him and he whirls back to check on him, watches as more pirates converge on Dream. One of them, as tall as Dream and twice as broad, swings his sword, big enough to match his stature, and Dream blocks, forced back by the blow. Nightmare slips from Dream’s grasp, the force of the hit sending it wheeling through the air. Without much thought, Sapnap guns for the sword, catches it before it hits the deck. The hilt is still warm from Dream, and the heat doesn’t dim under his touch.

Sapnap charges into the circle around Dream with a cry meant to draw attention away from his vulnerable friend and to himself. It works; Dream ducks when the man pinning him turns to look at Sapnap, and Sapnap sees him roll across the planks, reach Schlong and grab Sapnap’s sword up. As one, they attack, netherite swords singing for blood, creating a melody that will always be one of Sapnap’s favorite songs. He’s never heard other netherite

swords, but he's sure that Nightmare and Schlong were meant to fight together for the way they sound when it happens.

Together, he and Dream beat back the pirates, one of them jabbing when the other blocks, one of them parrying while the other strikes. They dance with little problem or hesitation, long-used to the way each other moves, able to predict each other's next action. Occasionally, a stray arrow finds its mark in opponents that might soon cause them issue, a gift from their third providing support from on high.

In the thick of it, Sapnap forgets everything but the next sweep of the blade, his next punch or attack. Outside of this, Sapnap doesn't...know much. He can't help Karl, or calm George, or comfort Dream, or protect Quackity nearly as well as he wishes he could do any of those things, but *this*? This is where he belongs, with a sword in hand and his eyes set on one opponent and then the other, until they finally begin to thin under his blade.

At one point, he and Dream switch blades, a hasty toss up of both made in a seconds-long pause between attacks. Schlong burns when Sapnap holds it again and he relishes the heat, the knowledge that Schlong is being fed, is pleased with this battle. If nothing else, Sapnap can at least please his sword.

He hears Puffy yelling encouragements, the loud echoes of war cries and creaking of wood underfoot, orders from an enemy captain that are quickly drowned out under the sounds of battle.

Sapnap finds himself sticking close to Dream; he knows that he's not the asset he used to be right now, muscles honed with exercise but no longer with instinct after so much loss and regain from when he'd been sick. They can keep each other safe, as they've always done. Sapnap can't let anything happen to him; he can't risk losing him again.

He doesn't realize his mistake, so focused on Dream that he loses track of the other players on the field, until it's too late.

He's chased a woman off and he's panting, trying to catch his breath in the break of attacks, when a familiar voice rings out above the general clamor of the *Michelle*.

"*Sapnap!*" Quackity shouts, and Sapnap's heart leaps into his throat. He spins, expecting Quackity to be pinned under an attacker, or fighting one back, or injured, or worse. Quackity can just about get out of a scrap, but this is a full on fight, with people that won't hesitate to kill them, and Quackity isn't a fighter; that's why Sapnap had pushed him and Karl back, tried to get them to go below deck before the rival crew had attacked. Sapnap was supposed to *protect* them, eliminate any threat before it could reach them.

He'd lost focus. He'd seen Dream in danger and his mind had just - latched on to that, to the idea that Sapnap *needed* to stay with him, in case something happened. Because of that, someone had gotten through his defenses.

He finds Quackity, choking on his panic - and feels his entire body go cold in shock.

Quackity and Karl had *both* been in danger. The picture in front of him shows him that clearly, but that isn't why Quackity had cried out for him. That isn't why Quackity is afraid.

Quackity is afraid because the pirate that had menaced them was no longer a threat - because Karl has embedded his teeth and fingers into the man's throat.

The pirate claws at Karl weakly, head tilted up to the sky, weak gurgles of pain bubbling past his lips alongside blood that streams down his neck.

Karl growls, an inhuman sound, and Sapnap sees him *chomp* on the man's throat, violently yank his head back. Sapnap watches on, shocked into a frozen stare, as Karl rips his throat out.

There's no weapon, Sapnap thinks dazedly, as he stumbles forward to - help? Stop him?

Karl doesn't need help, though. He steps back, releasing the man from his grip and bite and the man falls to the deck, dead. Karl flexes his fingers and bares his teeth - his fangs - at the dead body, and both are dripping.

Those aren't fingers, Sapnap realizes. They're claws. Curved and jagged and breaking out from the beds of his nails, razor sharp and slicked red with blood. There's crimson trailing down his throat, from his mouth and his fangs. Sapnap knows it's blood, but there's *more*. That glow from Karl's eyes has shifted and there's more than just blood, trailing under his skin in veiny lines of red that spider-web across Karl's flesh.

Karl turns to him with the same red glow in the pinpricks of his irises, and it's not blood but Sapnap has no idea what it actually is and that somehow makes it *worse*.

"Sapnap!" Dream warns, loud enough to break Sapnap's shock, "*Behind!*"

A *shwing* sounds behind him and he only just moves out the way. He brings Schlong up to attack but he doesn't get a chance to parry, to even jab back, before Karl is just *there*, right in front of him.

He thinks he hears a snarl before Karl is tearing into the man that just tried to kill him.

It isn't elegant. This isn't the fighting that Sapnap is used to, thrives in; Sapnap's fighting is a dance, with movements based on ingrained instinct and the weight of practice and history.

This is no fight; this is naked brutality.

Karl's claws hook under the chin of the pirate and *pulls*. The man doesn't even have time to scream before the claws rip away at skin and flesh and muscle and then there is a jaw on the floor at Sapnap's feet. There is an unshaped moan of agony as blood spills, and then an angry *crack* and Karl drops the man's body to the ground.

There is something guttural building in Karl's throat, he can hear it from here. It's released in the form of another one of those inhuman growls, low and piercing and unlike anything Sapnap has ever heard, let alone from *Karl*, in his life.

“Karl,” Sapnap says, stuttering forward. His foot slips on the sticky pool, and by the time he rights himself - barely a second, really, Karl has sprinted away, and -

“Oh my god,” Quackity says as he stumbles to Sapnap’s side, his hand on Sapnap’s elbow, horrified.

Battle cries give way to terrified screams and shouts of *monster!* Sapnap watches the enemy pirates turn tail to try to escape.

It’s a massacre. That’s the only word Sapnap can use to describe what he watches.

Even with he and Dream and George and Philza and Techno, they’d just barely managed to slow the flood of enemies. Ships like these can have crews of a hundred, maybe even more, if they want, and this crew had been massive compared to the bare thirty or so sailors that Puffy had brought. It had been a struggle.

Karl cuts through with ease. It’s like nothing Sapnap has ever seen before; Sapnap imagines that this violence is what XD would have looked like in the throes of battle. One moment, Karl’s claws slash along a neck, severing it so deeply the head lolls dangerously close to falling off entirely; the next, he has his hand buried deep in another’s chest and when he yanks it free, a shredded heart rolls on the weathered deck. He launches himself onto fleeing backs and tears into them with his fangs and claws and Sapnap would be sick from the carnage if he weren’t still in such shock.

It’s all over in less than a minute. Those who managed to escape flung themselves over the side of the *Michelle* or used hanging rope to swing back as their comrades were hunted down by Karl; others weren’t as lucky and fell to his fangs. Even Puffy’s crew isn’t safe, a few familiar faces just barely managing to escape with deep wounds as opposed to lost lives. The sharp stench of fear assaults Sapnap’s nose, fills his head with it, so much fear from so many, all caused by *Karl*, of all people.

Karl breathes heavily in the middle of the deck; skin pale, shoulders shaking. From this angle, Sapnap can’t see his eyes, but that same red has continued to travel in veins across his cheeks, to his neck and up past his temples and into his hair. He’s painted red with blood; it drips from his claws, splattered thickly across his face, soaked heavily into his hair and clothes.

“Karl?” Sapnap says, into the silence of a finished battle and a frozen deck, “Karl, are you..?”

He takes a step forward, Quackity still clutching his arm, when Puffy drops from the rigging, a heavy *thunk* despite her small size, and calls out, “*Don’t!* No one go near him! He’s gone feral. Don’t make any sudden moves.”

The entire crew, even those who are leant up against the railings of the deck with injuries, stay completely still.

Sapnap feels rooted to the spot, feet like lead. He’s not sure what to do. He can’t *think* through the panic and confusion. He tries to seek out Dream or George and finds them both on the forecastle, staring with just as much horror as him. Dream looks at him, half of his

body covering George as if on instinct, eyes wide enough that Sapnap can make out the green even halfway across the ship.

“Sap,” Quackity says, urgently, “Sap, what if he’s *hurt*?”

Sapnap shudders out a breath. Quackity is right. Karl needs them. Sapnap is long out of the habit of listening to Puffy, anyway. He takes another few tentative steps forward, then realizes he still has Schlöng in his hand. He straightens up, slides it back into its sheath to be cleaned later. What would normally be a background noise is infinitely louder in the echoing silence.

Karl whips around to properly face them immediately. His whole stance is defensive, claws raised, teeth bared. His skin isn’t just pale, it’s like his flesh has been drained of color. It’s *gray*.

“Karl,” Sapnap says, his hands raised to show that they’re empty, trying to keep his voice steady even as his heart thrums in panic and fear, “Karl, can you hear me?”

Karl stares, eyes sightless in their rage. Looking straight at him, Sapnap can better see the red in his eyes where his pupils should be, the crimson veins under the gray of his skin only making him look even paler. Like a corpse.

Karl’s face pulls into a snarl, shoulders rising as he lifts his claws in an aggressive display. His lips pull back, the fangs having elongated back to the size from that first night, stained pink with blood now.

“Don’t!” Puffy shouts.

“Be *quiet*,” George orders, a hiss dripping with the sort of command one might order an execution with, and Puffy subsides.

“Karl,” Sapnap says, “It’s us, darlin’. Just us.”

“You know us.” Quackity says, coming out from behind Sapnap. His hand is trembling when he extends it into the space between them and Karl, but he doesn’t retract his offer. “Come on, Karl. It’s over.”

Karl blinks as he examines Quackity’s hand. Sapnap watches as he reaches out, head tilting to one side, the tips of his claws touching the center of Quackity’s palm, almost painfully delicate as they trace along his skin, painting him red to match. Karl lets his hand lay flat on Quackity’s, the growls dying down until they sound more like hurt whines than the terrifying vocalizations of before.

A moment later, Karl’s knees give out, his body overcome with violent trembling. Sapnap throws all caution to the wind to grab at his elbows to steady him, Quackity a step behind him with his free hand on Karl’s shoulder. They all sink to the deck like that; surrounded by splintered wood and copper stains and the sound of the slowly retreating pirate ship in the distance.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Sapnap says, letting his hands glide from Karl's elbows to his neck, “You’re okay, we’re okay. Are you hurt, darlin’?”

He manages to get himself into Karl’s eyeline again; the red has started to fade, not only in his eyes but along the lines of his skin, a disconcerting sight to say the least, but the more troubling part of it is how Karl still stares at them, his face slack and without the slightest bit of recognition. Blood drips from his chin, darker than red, almost black.

This is worse than when Quackity wakes up and mistakes them for Schlatt. At least then he sees someone, at least they know that Quackity is there.

When Sapnap holds Karl, it’s a little bit like holding a firework, mid-explosion. He’s moving all the time, talking or humming or whispering under his breath. Holding Karl now, here, on the deck of the ship, is like holding an empty shell. It’s Karl’s hair, his face, his body; but there is nothing of *Karl* in these eyes. They’re blank. Utterly empty. He’s still and silent, except for ragged breathing.

“Karl?” He says again, and tries very hard not to sound as afraid as he is, “Karl, come back. Come on. You’ve done it before, right? Come back, darlin’”

Quackity thumbs at Karl’s cheek, the blood smearing more than wiping away under his touch, and he has to clear his throat before he can talk, still choked up when he speaks. “Karl, it’s okay. I’m safe, we’re all safe. We’re here.”

Karl blinks, languid. His face still slack, his expression lost, his pale eyes far away, he says, “I have to go home.”

“You are home,” Sapnap says, willing this version of Karl to believe it as firmly as Sapnap knows he usually does, to force it into existence. “You’re home. You’re with us.”

“Just look at us,” Quackity begs, “Please, Karl, look at us.”

“I have to...” Karl trails off, his voice soft and yielding, and his eyes flick up, truly looking at them for the first time, “I...”

He blinks again, more forceful this time, and his brow furrows, “Sapnap...? Q...?”

“Oh, thank fuck,” Quackity says, but Sapnap is already moving, pulling them both into a tight embrace, Karl shoved against his chest and Quackity squished into his side. He doesn’t care. They’re here, they’re with him, they’re safe. They’re never leaving the fucking mansion again, as soon as this is all over.

“Sap,” Karl says, muffled, “Sapnap, I can’t -”

“Right, sorry.” He pulls away, but only a little. Only enough for Karl to breathe, so he can keep them in his arms. He takes Karl in, from the still all-too-pale skin and the eyes, drooping heavily as if Karl is fighting off a sudden wave of exhaustion. The fangs have retracted once more, and he looks at Sapnap with overwhelming confusion. He’s so bloody. It looks wrong on someone like Karl.

“Are you hurt?” Sapnap asks, because that is the most important thing right now.

“No, I...” Karl trails off, his weight sagging in Sapnap’s arms, “What happened? Why can I taste - is that blood? Why is there blood in my mouth?”

“You saved me,” Quackity says, pressing a kiss to the top of Karl’s head and burying his face in his hair, heedless of the blood, “Saved all of us. We’re okay, and you’re home. That’s all that matters.”

“Oh, good,” Karl says, “Because I feel like I’m a second away from passing out right now, just a heads up.”

“You can go to sleep, darlin’” Sapnap says, “Rest for now. You did so good. You came back.”

“Like I’d go anywhere without you,” Karl says, dazedly, before his eyes slip shut and he passes out in Sapnap’s arms.

“We should get him to the cabin,” Quackity says, “Get him in a proper bed, at the very least.”

Sapnap stands, struggling a little bit under Karl’s weight after a full battle and the shock of it all, but he doesn’t let go and he keeps Karl tucked in tight to his chest. Quackity holds onto his arm, helping support Karl’s weight, as they turn to find everyone staring at him. Dream and George are closest, waiting a respectful distance at the edge of the crowd, but Puffy and Foolish stand not too far, weapons drawn but down. Phil and Techno aren’t far behind, both stone-faced as they stare. Wilbur stands at the hatch, no doubt having hidden with his brothers,

Even Phil’s boys have a sight on them, their heads poking up from the hatch in the center of the deck in accordance to height, and it is Tommy, *eternally* Tommy, who breaks the stunned silence; “So... Did we win?”

Dream and George stay above deck to give the three of them some space. Sapnap appreciates it, that his friends know what he needs before he even has to say the words; Dream just fetches a few clean rags and a basin of water so they can get rid of some of the blood, and gives Karl a worried look before they disappear to go help with post-battle clean-up.

Sapnap wishes that everyone on board would give them the same amount of fucking space right now.

"No." Sapnap says, folding his arms and using his whole body to block the door of the cabin. "He's resting. Whatever you have to say can wait until tomorrow."

"Sapnap," Puffy says, "I get it. I'm a big, bad bitch and you hate me. Fine, that's fair, *whatever*. But I have things to say and Karl needs to hear them."

"He just woke up." Sapnap snaps, "Whatever you want to say, he won't be able to *hear* it right now. You saw what happened to him, do you really think he's in a state to get new information?"

“He’s going to have to be.” Puffy says without sympathy. “He’s in danger. He’s *a* danger. This is only going to get worse.”

“He is *not* a danger,” Sapnap glares, uncrossing his arms and laying a hand on the door jamb, blocking it more effectively. “And keep your voice down if you’re going to say shit like that.”

“I know you don’t like me right now.” Puffy says, not lowering her voice at all, “But that doesn’t mean I don’t know what I’m talking about. I’m *trying* to help you, Sapnap. All five of you. Don’t lose your friends to your own damn obstinance.”

The smell of burning wood reaches his nose. He drops his hand and leaves a scorch mark on the door jam. He hears his clothes crackle as he heats up, his anger tilting his temperature up, up, up.

“*Everything* I am doing is to keep him safe. Keep them *all* safe.” He grits out.

“I know.” Puffy stands firm, “I know exactly what kind of friend you are, Sapnap. So, I’m telling you that I know what’s happening to him, what’s *going* to happen to him. And I’m hoping that that stubbornness your dad taught you will subside long enough for you to do the smart thing and *let me help*.”

Sapnap glares at her, his mind at war with himself. He thinks he hates her, for what she put Dream through, but he doesn’t know if he can trust her or not. What’s the right call? What’s the right decision? Dream and George aren’t here with him to help him make him, but Karl and Quackity are relying on him to keep them safe, to be smart about all of this while Karl recovers and Quackity cares for him.

“Sap?” Karl’s weak voice echoes from behind the door and Sapnap is forced to make a call.

“*Fine*,” He grits out, “But if I think, for even a *second*, that you’re pushing too far, I will set you on fucking fire, Puffy.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Puffy says, falling back with what might be relief.

Reluctantly, Sapnap opens the door. Karl is where he left him; sitting up in the bunk with Quackity cradling his hands, rubbing in numbing cream into the places in his hands where his claws - gods, his fucking *claws* - are retreating back into his skin. The first thing they’d done was strip him out of his clothes and scrub him down as best they could. His hair is clean, at least, and the worst of the blood has been removed. He’s wearing one of Sapnap’s shirts with a blanket over his lap for modesty, and his cloak draped around his shoulders and hanging loosely.

He looks exhausted and ill.

“You’re steaming, hotstuff,” Karl says with a weak smile. His cheeks are still red and puffy from crying and Sapnap hates it. Hates that he can’t do anything but stand guard when all the danger is coming from inside and from far, far away, in a different fucking dimension.

“Miss me that much?” Karl asks.

“I was gone for less than five minutes,” He says, instead of the thoughts rushing through his head, forcing himself to cool down so his clothes will stop smoking, “Clingy much, dude?”

“You know me,” Karl says, “Always down for some clinging.”

His smile, already weak, falls even further when Sapnap steps aside, and he sees Puffy in the doorway behind.

“I know you’re recovering and you’ve got a lot to...process,” she starts speaking before Karl can get a word out, “But your transformation is progressing faster than I thought it would. We need to talk about it. About what’s going to happen from here on out.”

“Right now?” Karl asks, sounding defeated.

“It’s best if you know now. I don’t know how...quickly this will progress. Next steps could be within hours, I’ve no fuckin’ idea what to expect here.” Puffy admits. The idea that ‘next steps’ are a *thing*, and that they might happen at any time makes Sapnap sick.

He sits on the bed next to Karl to hide his weak knees.

“Okay.” Karl sighs and shakes himself out, “Fine. Okay. Hit me with it, cap’n.”

Puffy glances at Quackity, then at Sapnap, “It’ll...be a lot to hear. I don’t know if you want to -”

“We’re staying,” Quackity says, immediately, with Sapnap adding a second later, “Whatever you have to say, you can say it in front of us.”

Karl’s hand tightens imperceptibly around Quackity’s, and he nods.

“First of all,” Puffy says, “How do you feel?”

Karl bites his lip, and Sapnap holds his breath. “For real?”

“For real.” Puffy says, lips quirking.

“Tired.” Karl looks at his hands, limp in Quackity’s, “Freaked out, to be honest.. I didn’t...it was...I don’t know. I don’t have the words.”

Sapnap breathes in carefully. Karl without words is a contradictory statement. Words are to Karl what heat is to Sapnap.

“Can you try? Talk to me about what happened.” Puffy asks, “It’ll give me a better sense of where you’re up to.”

“Someone came at me and Quackity,” Karl says, “He went for Q and I just...I just saw red. Literally. It was like...a fog came over my eyes and all I could think was that he was going to hurt Q. He wasn’t even a *person*, he was just a thing that was going to hurt Quackity and I

wasn't gonna let him. I think...I think I was there, for a second, with the first guy, but then someone tried to hurt *Sapnap*, too, and I..." He trails off, but Quackity nods encouragingly and Sapnap sees how their hands tense around each other's before Karl takes a stuttering breath and continues.

"It felt like I was drowning. I was...like, choking. Choking on rage, like it was in my throat, suffocating me. I wasn't...I wasn't *me*. I didn't know who was an enemy or a friend; I didn't...I didn't care. There was just anger, and this urge I can't describe to just - do it more and more, and nothing else. And after the fight..." Karl shudders, "It was like I was empty - no, even more. Like I was nothing. Nobody at all. Just waiting until there was something else to scratch that itch. It wasn't until Sapnap...called out to me, and I saw Quackity's hand, that I felt like I could breathe again. Like I was *me* again."

Sapnap doesn't let himself panic. He doesn't have the time or energy to panic right now. All he has is this moment, so he uses it to put his hand on Karl's blanket-covered leg and squeeze. Karl glances at him, eyes pulling down with exhaustion, worry and tiredness in every line on his face.

Puffy sighs, "That's what I was worried about."

Her face twists and Sapnap's heart skips a beat. He knows it's bad news before she says anything and he has to focus on his temperature again, forcing himself to stay calm so he doesn't burn anyone.

"I'm sorry, Karl." Puffy crosses her arms. "That's...well. It's only going to get worse from here, buddy. And it's how you'll end up if you don't make a deal with the Empress. Until you make a deal, or accept your place in her court -"

"Yeah, like I'll be doing *that*,"

"Then it will keep happening." Puffy says heavily, "It'll be in times of high emotional stress, at first, then it just...devolves from there. And if you wait too long..." She trails off.

"If we wait too long?" Sapnap pushes.

"If you wait too long, you eventually won't...you won't come back." Puffy looks over all three of them as she speaks. "You came back this time, Karl. You didn't hurt the people you love. But that won't be the case, eventually. The Nether always gets its due. You'll become her soldier. You won't be *you* ever again."

"So, I just have to never get into another life-or-death situation again," Karl says, struggling to hold his voice steady, "Great. That's going to be easy, you know, going into the Nether. I'm great at avoiding threats to my life!"

"I nearly lost myself in the Nether, Karl," Puffy says, almost gentle in her delivery, "There were times that I thought I wouldn't make it out. Times where I - I lost myself. That's what she wants. She wants you to be so terrified of the alternative that you accept your place with her. If you don't, she'll make sure your deal punishes you for it. She's not the kind of woman to take no for an answer with grace."

“What does...accepting her offer mean?” Sapnap asks.

“It means embracing your roots and becoming a Vex.” Puffy says, “Joining her court. Gaining unimaginable power. It’s like becoming a god.”

Sapnap thinks of XD. A demigod from the Nether. Is that what Dream had been? Had the magic been from her, part of her court?

“Even then, there is a loss. Vex aren’t human. Can’t be human. Your...your existence, it ties to the Nether. To the Empress. Whatever loyalty means to Vex, they have it for her. The way they go through the world is...warped. It’s you, but it isn’t. It’s you, but you’re more, and less. I don’t know.” Puffy clears her throat, “You get real, real interested in making deals by then.”

“So, it’s like...like in the stories. They’re real.”

Puffy nods. “You talked about changelings, before. It’s not exactly that, but, like you said. All stories come from somewhere.”

“These feel distinctly badland-esque in nature,” Karl grumbles and Sapnap elbows him, huffing when it just makes Karl laugh shallowly and lean against him.

Puffy doesn’t lighten up under the laughter. She sighs again, still so heavy. “You’ve felt it now. Vex don’t feel like humans do. They’re...simpler, in some ways. Things get...lost in translation. Or transformation, more aptly. ”

“Love doesn’t, though. Get lost, I mean.” Karl says. He holds tighter to Quackity, looking at Sapnap, as if he has the answers. “XD -” he cuts himself off and backtracks with a choked sigh

“Love doesn’t. Right?” he asks Puffy.

“I don’t know.” She says, shrugging. She looks sad as she talks. “I really don’t. If they do love, it isn’t as we know it, I’ll bet. If it’s anything like what I saw, it’s obsessive. Fanatic, even. Fleeting, probably. Permanence isn’t a *thing* for Vex, they’re as infinite as is possible.”

Sapnap bites his lip. XD hadn’t been fleeting. His feelings for George had never waived. Was that Dream’s influence? It must be. Dream’s feelings had overwhelmed the magic, the inherent...Vexhood of what XD was, maybe. But he’d been fanatic, for sure. Obsessive, Sapnap would have agreed with in his darker moments, before he’d known who was behind that moon-like mask.

Puffy leans back against the door, tugging at her hair as she talks. “Still, that’s better, in my view. Better than the strays that try to fight back or don’t make it in time. Sometimes, they can’t even make it to the Nether in time, or they take too long coming up with a deal that she’ll accept and those poor bastards,” Puffy shudders. “They don’t even get the luxury of *that* existence. They’re just...little soldiers. Beasts for the Empress to use. That’s what happened to you today, Karl. And it’ll happen again, and again, until you make it right with her.”

“Fuck.” Karl curls his hands tight around Quackity’s, bowing his head. His shoulders are near to his ears, tension keeping them rigid against Sapnap’s side. “*Fucking* fuck. *Fuck*. How the *fuck* am I supposed to - how do I even -”

He cuts himself off, humming sharply in agitation and then darting his head up to stare at Puffy.

“You did it.” He says, almost accusing. “How did you do it? Survive?”

Puffy finally smiles, wry, “I called it my anchor.”

“Of course you did.”

“It acted like, well,” she shrugs a shoulder, “an anchor. It kept me tethered. I didn’t have... people. Not like you do, not back then. It was before my ship, my crew. Years before I found Dream. All I had was my first love; the sea. That’s what kept me...me. I don’t know if it’ll work for you, but I just found my anchor and I kept it with everything I had. I held on to it. I didn’t let go, not for anything.”

“Clingy.” Karl looks away from Puffy, finds Sapnap’s eyes and then Quackity’s. “I can do clingy.”

“We love clingy.” Quackity says with a wobbly smile. It’s more than Sapnap can bear right now.

“We won’t let go, either.” Sapnap says, and it’s almost a threat.

“She’ll use that,” Puffy cuts in bluntly, “She will see how much you care for them and she will use that to her advantage. Be careful with that bond of yours.”

Sapnap snorts humourlessly, thinking of hand-shaped bruises on vulnerable skin, bleeding rope burns and a sword pressed to his throat. “It’s nothing we haven’t dealt with before. Now, are you done? Karl needs to rest.”

Puffy closes her eyes, gathers her patience and straightens up from her lean. “I hear you, dick. I’m leaving.”

“Thanks, Captain,” Karl says, swallowing thickly. “For the info. And the advice.”

“From one stray to another,” Puffy waves him off, sounding tired but not displeased, “We’ve got four more days to go before we reach the island, and then a couple weeks after that to Kinoko. Try to hold out. Find your anchor.”

“I already have.” Karl says quietly. Puffy leaves, shutting the door firmly behind her.

The silence settles in. Karl drags his hands from Quackity’s and covers his face, rubbing his palms roughly into his eyes.

“You should get some rest.” Sapnap says, trying to keep his voice gentle. It comes out rough with suppressed emotion - though which emotion, Sapnap can’t say. It’s all a tangle in his

chest, surrounding his flame.

“How?” Karl asks, “I need to process. I won’t be sleeping for the next decade trying to get all this bullshit to make sense.”

“It’s just,” Quackity starts, standing up and crossing his arms as he begins to pace, “It doesn’t make sense. None of it makes sense.”

“Not a lick of it!” Karl concurs, also standing up. He stumbles, catches himself before either of them can, and starts to pace in a direction perpendicular to Quackity.

“Well.” Sapnap says, watching them both walk from one side of the room to the other in tandem, “Since when does anything make sense in our lives, honestly? We’re fucked. If it’s not one thing, it’s another.”

“Why was I *woken up*, or whatever?” Karl bitches, “I’m human. What great thing do I have to offer to the *Empress of the Nether*, huh? What good would someone like me bring to a fucking eternal court, huh? I’m a good alchemist, but good alchemists are a dime a dozen! I’m not exactly a top shelf prize!”

“You are to us,” Quackity says firmly, “Stop putting yourself down. You’re a catch. Of course the Empress wants you.”

“Thank you, angel, but I’d rather be third tier and have her leave me alone.”

“You should have thought of that before you decided to become the best thing to ever happen to us,” Sapnap says, going for dramatic and joking. He just wants to make Karl smile, or laugh, again. Help ease his mood even a little. It works, at least. Karl giggles and slaps a hand over his mouth as if affronted that he had the nerve to laugh at a time like this.

Walking around in nothing but Sapnap’s shirt, giggling, is a nice look on him. Despite how fucking exhausted Sapnap is, he appreciates the view.

“You’re both adorable,” Karl sighs, stopping in the middle of the room and leaning on the bolted-down table, “And I appreciate it. But I’ll be honest, this soup is boilin’ pretty high right now and I’m not sure I picked the right pot for the job, if you know what I mean. I attract trouble like Wilbur attracts giant L’s. Avoiding high stress isn’t gonna be a cake walk.”

“It’s just, like, your coping mechanism, isn’t it?” Quackity sighs, “Making fun of him?”

“I’ve just received some devastating news, my love, please let me process how I choose to process,”

Quackity cracks a smile, a weary amusement on his face. “I’ll let it go because you’re processing.”

“Your kindness would bring me to my knees, were I able to give up being at perfect kissing height,” Karl places a hand over his heart. It takes the hand off the table, and Karl ends up sprawled across it when his knees suddenly buckle.

“Ah,” He winces, waving Sapnap, already halfway off the bed, and Quackity, arms outstretched, off, “look at that. To my knees, I went. Your power, my beloved,”

“Don’t joke.” Quackity drops the smile, stepping to Karl’s side and helping him stand, “Sit on the bed with Sapnap before you fall on your face.”

“I do my best thinking when I’m walking,” Karl complains, but he lets himself be bullied back into Sapnap’s arms, collapsing against his chest with a loud sigh.

“At least I have this still,” Karl mutters, putting a hand over Sapnap’s chest and patting his pecs fondly, “When I’m naught but a mindless drone to the magical mythical empress that rules the scary hellscape, even her power won’t wrest the memory of these bad boys from me.”

“Not funny.” Sapnap flushes, “Stop groping me. We’re all processing together so you can get some sleep.”

“Well, if I can’t make fun of Wilbur Soot and I can’t find comfort in my favorite pillows in the world, I don’t know how I’m meant to process anything.”

“You could try talking.” Quackity sits on the bed across from them. It’s only a handful of feet away, but it feels like a chasm. Sapnap, once again, damns these awful beds. Even the three of them, far too used to cramming into one-person sleeping arrangements throughout the course of their relationship, hadn’t been able to even uncomfortably get all of them on one of these cots. Patches’ hay had been the first time that they’d been able to sleep next to each other properly instead of in turns.

“Talking could work.” Sapnap agrees, letting Karl continue to pat his chest thoughtlessly despite telling him off about it.

“I talk all the time. I haven’t stopped talking since I learned *how* to.” Karl scoffs. “What will talking do? I know what has to happen, and I know it’s gonna fucking suck. I’m a walking danger to everyone around me. If I get too stressed out, I start ripping out throats like I’m some sort of horrific sideshow attraction. Come one, come all, and watch the heinous stray *eat people* to appease his stress levels!”

“Karl...” Quackity says, voice soft. “I...that must have been bad. All the...the death. But we’re not scared of you. That wasn’t you.”

“It wasn’t.” Karl sits up from Sapnap, putting space between them that hurts like a knife. Sapnap lets him, though, and keeps his hands to himself despite how badly he wants to grab him back. “It wasn’t me, and that’s exactly why you *should* be scared.”

“So, you...massacred a few pirates,” Sapnap shrugs, “We all have bad days. I’m not scared of you, Karl. Neither of us are scared of you, no matter what you do.”

“Neither of you are getting it.” Karl bites out, huffing in what Sapnap is surprised to hear is what might be genuine annoyance. “I don’t *care* that I killed them. I don’t give a single flying fuck about them. Yum, a human heart diet, let me at it! I. Don’t. Care. If doing so keeps either

of you safe, I wouldn't hesitate." Karl lifts a hand, palm up, and stares at his curled fingers. "I'd let everyone on this ship take an eternal rest and I'd do it myself if it meant keeping you guys safe. But what terrifies me, and what *you* should be afraid of is that," he clenches his fist tightly, "by the end...I didn't even know you."

Sapnap winces. He knows that. He understands what Karl means. When Sapnap had looked into his eyes earlier, they hadn't been...alive, even. There had been no recognition, not just of Sapnap but of *anything*. It's like Karl had been an empty husk containing little more than passively-aware sentience.

"I didn't know either of you." Karl continues. "If it was just teeth and claws, fine. Whatever. I'd be hot with those, for sure. But I didn't *know you*. It was just...fight, and blood, and the urge to keep fighting and killing until I was -" Karl cuts himself off sharply, inhales and releases with a high-pitched hum, "Until I was home. I couldn't control myself. I couldn't stop. I could have hurt you."

"You'd never hurt us." Quackity disputes. "You would never."

"I would have." Karl says without hesitation. "I didn't recognize you. If you'd been in the crowd when I was *hunting*," Karl spits the word, "I'd have attacked you like I did those pirates. I wouldn't forgive myself, if that happened. I'd rather die."

"Fuck off." Quackity snaps, his voice rising. "Sapnap brought you back with his *voice*. All you did when I gave you my hand was *caress* me, fucker. You wouldn't have hurt us. Not then, not ever."

"You heard what Puffy said." Karl shrugs, letting the emotion fall from his voice so it's just - blank, factual, lifeless. "This could - this *will* happen again. I'll lose control again. Next time, I might pick a different direction to rage in. I might go after one of you."

"Puffy doesn't know everything." Sapnap scoffs, that useless tangle of emotions nearly choking him. It's an echo of Dream's words. "So what if she says shit? She didn't have anyone to help her. Her anchor was a big fucking puddle. You have us."

"I won't if I kill you, Sapnap." Karl rubs at his eyes again. "What then, huh? When I lose control and go feral on you? Or, gods forbid, Quackity? At least you'd be able to fight me off, maybe, but -"

"Watch it." Quackity cuts him off, voice hard. "I'm not easy pickings and you aren't some big bad wolf. I don't believe you'd hurt me, not for a second."

"Quackity," Karl says, voice gentle, "I mean this in the kindest, most loving way that I can possibly mean it. But if I went after you when I was like that, there is not a thing you could do to stop me. And when I came back, and I'd fucking ravaged you, you'd forgive me without a second fucking thought, and I'm a weak, pathetic asshole and I'd let you do it. I couldn't live with myself if I hurt you, angel. Do you get that? I'd rather die than become a part of your nightmares. I will pull my own heart out of my chest before I give you another reason to scream yourself awake."

“Don’t.” Quackity says coldly. “Don’t you dare go there, Karl Jacobs.”

“I mean it.” Karl shrugs. “I won’t do it. I won’t be like *him*, letting you make excuses for why it’s okay that I hurt you. Either of you, because you *would*.”

“I said *don’t*.” Quackity stands up. “Don’t bring him into this. I’ve had *enough* of Sapnap doing it, I won’t fucking stand here for you to do it, too. You aren’t and never will be like Schlatt. None of you are like Schlatt. You are *nothing* like him and you never have been and you never will be.”

Karl shakes his head, leaning over to rest his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. When he speaks, he sounds defeated.

“I will be, if I let that happen.” Karl says simply. “When I lose control, what then? I won’t know you. I won’t care about you. I’ll be a monster. I’ll be,” Karl breathes in shakily. “I’ll be a Vex.”

“So?” Quackity scoffs, more a sneer than a huff of air, “Be a Vex, then. It won’t change anything. XD loved George. George loved XD.”

“XD was a hybrid,” Karl shakes his head, “He was a freak of nature, baby. Sheer luck and Dream being stubborn, that’s what XD was. Happenstance and luck.”

“Enough.” Sapnap interrupts, raising his voice. He doesn’t do it to them often, not seriously, and it makes them both look at him, Quackity’s eyes stormy with anger, Karl’s dull. “You’re just arguing, now, and what good will that do any of us?”

“None.” Karl admits.

“Is this the energy you’re coming at this with, Karl?” Sapnap continues, frowning. “This is some pessimistic shit. Are we giving up already?”

“Not giving up,” Karl groans, rubbing his face hard and sitting up straight, “I just want to be realistic about this. It isn’t safe for you two, or Dream and George. It’s actively dangerous to be around me right now.”

“I’m not scared of you.” Quackity practically lashes out with his voice. “I’m not scared of you and I never will be. But I am fucking furious. I’m getting really sick of Schlatt being brought up every time something like this happens. I’m getting really fucking sick of you two comparing yourself to him.”

“I don’t mean to.” Karl says, at least sounding apologetic. “It’s just - it’s hard. I hate him so much. I don’t want to be anything like him, and yet -” he grunts, pulling at his curls sharply. “Here I am. Worried that I’m going to go crazy and *hurt* you.”

“You won’t.” Quackity stares him down. “That’s it. That’s the conclusion. You. Won’t. You’d never. I’m the one that held your hand. I’m the one who felt your claws on my pulse. The one who felt your fangs at my throat. I’m the one that you touched, after you’d ripped a man’s

fucking heart out, Karl. And you didn't even scratch me, let alone *attack* me. Get that through your thick fucking skull."

Karl breathes in deeply, shoulders rolling back and then curving forward.

Sapnap watches them both, frozen in place. He feels too much; guilty, upset, unsure. He doesn't know what to do. Once again, he's lost.

"Okay." Karl gives in. "If you think I won't hurt you, I can't change your mind. Just...be careful. Please, Q. For my sake, if you won't do it for yours. You're half of my heart, angel. I'd...I don't know what I'd do, if..."

"You're half of mine, too" Quackity huffs. "Idiot. That's how I know you wouldn't."

Sapnap makes himself stand up and stand between them, taking a hand from each of them and just..holding on tightly.

"I know things are scary," he starts out, "but we're going to win this. We haven't lost a battle yet. This won't be the thing to break our streak. Okay?"

"Okay." Karl nods, clinging to his hand. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I'm just - tired. And stressed. And worried."

"I know." Quackity nods carefully. "I know. Me, too."

"I'm sorry I brought him up." Karl looks up, finally, to see Quackity and Sapnap both. "I shouldn't have. That was...I shouldn't have."

"I forgive you." Quackity squeezes Sappnap's hand and then drops it. "I'm going to go on a walk. I need to get my thoughts in order."

"Alone?" Sapnap can't help but double-check, anxious. Quackity stares at him and Sapnap winces, nods quickly. "Alone is fine. We'll be here."

"Right here." Karl leans back against the wall. "I love you, angel. You know that, right?"

"Of course I do." Quackity swallows, "I love you, too. Both of you."

"Both of you," Sapnap repeats, gentle, and he lets Quackity leave.

The door shuts gently behind his fiancée, and Sapnap turns to Karl, who looks up at him - vulnerable and sad and scared, Sapnap can see it, underneath that painfully bland, logical tone he'd been speaking in.

"Come one," Sapnap decides. "I'm fucking sick of these cots. We're fixing this before he gets back."

"How?" Karl asks, blinking.

Sapnap finds the corners of the thin mattress laid across the wood of the top bunk and yanks it down, letting it flop to the floor soundlessly.

“Oh.” Karl says, and smiles, small and shy. It’s enough, and it’s proof that this, at least, Sapnap can still do for him.

Quackity likes the sea at dusk. It’s calm. Peaceful in a way that the land at night isn’t; mobs don’t hide in the waves the same way that they hide in the trees.

If it got any more peaceful, they would be stranded. As it is, the wind barely blows as Quackity sits, his feet dangling over the edge of the stern of the ship, the wheel and rest of the ship behind him.

There is still blood on the deck from the battle. Still scrapes that haven’t been buffed out yet. Tomorrow, Quackity bets, there will be a mass clean-up to try and at least scrub some of the stains out of the wood before they’re sanded, nicks are fixed, and things are set to rights. For now, he’s just grateful that there are no bodies.

Below him, he knows, Sapnap is with Karl. Quackity can imagine him taking his time to press his lips against everything he can reach, from Karl’s newly sharpened nails to his fangs to around his eyes, to help him settle into them. Quackity wishes he was down there with them, but he’d needed time. And some space, to re-compartmentalize. It’s less often, nowadays, that Schlatt is brought up. Quackity still has nightmares, but they’re not as awful as they used to be, and Sapnap had been making so much progress with not dwelling on him, either. Now *Karl* is doing it, too.

Quackity can’t help but wonder, perhaps a bit bitterly, when Schlatt will stop hurting him and the people he cares about. If even the memory of him is enough to cause strife amongst them.

The sun will be setting soon. Quackity is going to give it until darkness has fallen to feel sorry for himself, and then he’s going to return to the cabin and put his attention toward Karl, who needs him right now. Karl is the one going through a terrifying series of events, who needs support and love, and to be told that he isn’t a monster. Quackity can’t just leave it to Sapnap to care for him when he’s down, no matter how anxious a part of him is about all of this.

He hears footsteps. At first, he thinks it’s just part of the crew, a night watch getting into position; but they come closer, eventually, and stop not far from him.

“Want company?” A familiar voice asks, and Quackity fights the urge to sigh.

“No.” he says firmly.

Wilbur slides into place beside him, anyway. Quackity turns to argue, to send him away, but catches sight of Wilbur’s expression. He has a feeling that, beyond getting up and leaving, he isn’t getting out of this conversation.

He gives in with a huff, scooting away so there's more space between them, at least. A solid few feet to hopefully curb whatever ideas Wilbur has got in his head.

"You good, man?" he asks, because the faster he gets this over with, the faster Wilbur will go.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" Wilbur asks. "After what happened to your affianced today?"

"You wouldn't mean it." Quackity scoffs. Wilbur would mean the concern as much as Quackity had meant it when he'd asked. They're both dependable that way.

"I would."

"Bullshit," Quackity wants to laugh, but he's too tired. "You don't give a fuck about Karl."

Wilbur's eyes flick over to him, "I'm doing an awful lot to help someone who you say I don't give a fuck about."

"Oh, yeah, you're so selfless. Thank you ever so much for being the hero, Wilbur."

"*One*," Wilbur says, and there's no mistaking the heat behind his words, "*I* suggested bringing you along. Fought for it, actually, if you'll recall. And *two*, you have no idea what a big deal this is. Maybe I *am* a hero in this tale, Quackity."

"Sure, whatever." Quackity shrugs. "You guys go on a family bonding trip to another dimension, and you let us tag along out of the kindness of your heart. You're a real fuckin' hero. What else do I need to know?"

"We're -" Wilbur huffs in frustration. "You always see the worst in me, I suppose."

"No," Quackity says, letting his hands smooth out the wrinkles in his pants for something to do. "Just the real you. Good and bad."

"So why can't you see the good I'm trying to do here?"

"Is it good?" Quackity doesn't look at him, letting his eyes follow a wave from conception to disappearance, "If you can honestly tell me right now, and mean it, that you're doing this because you wanted to help Karl, then I'll thank you. If you're doing it because you saw he was in trouble and you knew a way to help, and that is *it*, then I'll thank you. But that isn't why you did it, is it?"

Wilbur is silent.

"Yeah." Quackity sighs. "Don't try to play mind games with me, Wilbur. I've already suffered a lifetime of them."

"I missed this." Wilbur says, and Quackity knows he's smiling. "The games. You calling me out on my shit. No one does it quite like you, Big Q."

"It's a gift."

“It is.” Wilbur agrees. “The person we’re going to see is more than a random woman we’re acquainted with, you know?”

“Yeah?” Quackity does turn then, because this is information that he needs. That he knows Wilbur will give him.

“I know it’s pointless to ask, but if you’d kindly not spill my whole secret to the buffoons you call fiancés, I’d appreciate it.”

“Don’t call them buffoons.” Quackity frowns. “I won’t promise you anything. If it helps Karl, I’ll tell them anything. If you don’t want them to know, then don’t tell me. I’m not a secret keeper anymore.”

“Not even for a friend?”

“Is that what we are?” Quackity raises an eyebrow. “Can we *be* friends, Wilbur? Would you even let that happen?”

It’s Wilbur’s turn to avoid his eye. He stares out at the sea.

“We’re not in parliament, anymore,” Quackity says, and he lets himself be gentle when he says it. “We’re not in the middle of a coup. Tell me what you want to tell me, or fuck off, Wil. Leave me to my brooding.”

“Oh, is that what you were doing?” Wilbur swallows thickly. “I thought you were just seasick.”

“Tell me, for fuck’s sake.”

“We’re going to see the Queen of the End.” Wilbur says, all in one breath.

Quackity blinks. “Excuse me?”

“We’re going to,” Wilbur hesitates this time, “see the queen. I’ve already got an audience with her.”

“An audience with the queen.” Quackity repeats dumbly.

“Yes, Quackity,” Wilbur leans back on his hands, still not looking at him, “You’ll be meeting the Queen of the Other Side. You’re in luck; we can only visit the End every seven years. Think of it like the good captain’s deal; Phil made one, too, when he married my mum.”

“Phil married someone from the Court? Is that how he knows the queen? Does that mean you’re...” Quackity hesitates, “You’re a stray?”

“Oh, no,” Wilbur laughs, but there’s no amusement in his tone, “No, I’m not a stray. The Other Side doesn’t do strays, and, even if they did, my mum’s a bit more...important than your average courtier. That’s the best part for you. It means she can help you.”

“When you say important, what do you mean?”

“She has status.”

“What kind?” Quackity pushes.

“Does it matter?” Wilbur pushes right back, “It’s the kind of status that means she can help. That’s enough, isn’t it?”

“You’re keeping something from me.” Quackity snaps, “There’s something you aren’t saying, and it’s important. Tell me who your godsdamn mom is, Wilbur!”

“You know who she is,” Wilbur tilts his head back and then to the side, finally meeting Quackity’s eyes. “You’re not a fool. You knew as soon as I said it.”

“No, I don’t.” Quackity says, because he’d rather lie than admit that the sick feeling in his stomach has reason to be there.

“Oh, stop it,” Wilbur rolls his eyes, lips pulling down. “Is that what you’re used to now, being able to get away with the little lies you tell yourself because they won’t call it out? I see the real you, too, Big Q. You figured it out in that smart, little head of yours.”

“Your mom is not a fucking queen.” Quackity says in disbelief, ignoring the rest of the statement because it’s bait meant to pull him off topic.

“She’s *the* queen.” Wilbur repeats. “And I’m a prince. The Prince of the End and the Other Side, in fact.”

Quackity laughs. He can’t help it. The idea is - it’s not ridiculous so much as impossible. Wilbur as the prince of anything except a bygone empire that had broken apart when Quackity was barely walking isn’t something that makes sense.

“What’s funny?” Wilbur scowls.

“Fucking Prime,” Quackity runs a hand down his face roughly, “You’re bringing us home to meet your mom.”

“Is that such a bad thing?”

“*Yes!*”

“What?” Wilbur sneers, “Are you afraid that this is some sort of trick? Do you think I’m attempting an intimacy that isn’t mine to take?”

“Yes.” Quackity says without hesitation, because he *knows* it’s true, no matter how mockingly Wilbur reveals it.

“Don’t worry,” Wilbur says, not quite managing to disguise the bitterness in his voice, “She’ll know as soon as she looks at you.”

“Know *what?*”

“That it’s you three, of course,” Wilbur shrugs. “Nothing to do with me.”

“It has everything to do with you.” Quackity argues. “You’re...you’re bringing us there. You’re introducing us to your mother. She’s -” Quackity rubs his face again, resenting Wilbur for making him deal with this, on top of everything else happening right now. “She’s a fucking goddess. Isn’t she? That’s what she and the Empress are, they’re goddesses and they have courts full of demigods. Fuck. *Fuck*. What does that make you, then?”

“No demigod.” Wilbur huffs a laugh.

“Then what? A full god?”

“Human. Human enough to get my heart broken.” Wilbur replies, so casually that it feels like a slap across Quackity’s face.

“*Wilbur.*”

“Quackity.”

They sit in silence for a moment, that single utterance of his name saying everything that Wilbur isn’t.

“What do you expect me to say to that, Wil?”

“I don’t know.” Wilbur says, “What do you want to say?”

“Fuck you.”

“That’s fair.” Wilbur hums. “Anything else?”

“What do you *want* me to say?”

“Something like...*oh, Wilbur, I’ve been waiting to hear those words!* Perhaps more or less dramatic. Make it good for the grandkids when we tell the stories.”

Quackity can’t look at him. He turns back to the sea.

“I knew.” Quackity says, instead of anything that he knows Wilbur is hoping to hear.

Wilbur’s eyes stay on him instead of paralleling his body language, which is about as much indication that Quackity gets that he’s ruffled him.

“I always knew.” Quackity admits. “I know my eye is fucked but I’m not fucking blind, Wilbur. I know what it means when someone looks at me like you did.”

“Do.” Wilbur says quietly.

“Fine. Like you do. It doesn’t change anything. It never did.”

“I waited for you.”

“Waited for *what*?” Quackity snorts, mirthless.

“For you to ask. I would have been there, if you had only asked,” Wilbur says, so fast it’s like lightning, “I would have killed Schlatt for you. Destroyed the throne for you. You’re being allowed into a realm no mortal outside of my family has ever been allowed to enter, because I asked. For you. To make you happy.”

“Bullshit.”

“What about that is bullshit?” Wilbur snaps, “What about this makes you think I’d not do just as much as your boys would? *More* than they would!?”

“More than they would?” Quackity blinks, the frustration knocked right out of him by the claim and replaced with shock. “Wilbur, nobody in the entire world could do more for me than they already *did*. They saved me.”

“I would have.”

“You wouldn’t have.” Quackity corrects. “You’re lying to yourself. You didn’t kill Schlatt. You didn’t destroy the throne. Those things didn’t fit into your plan. You wanted to use them to get power. Saving me would have got in the way of that. I wasn’t worth it, for you. I never, ever would have been worth more than any throne to you, Wilbur.”

“Do you think so little of yourself?” Wilbur wrinkles his nose up in a sneer, finally turning back to the ocean.

“No.” Quackity says, thoughtfully. “But I used to. If you’d said that to me, back then, I’d have believed you. And you would have hurt me, just like Schlatt. Used me.”

Wilbur freezes.

“Never.” he says, and Quackity doesn’t believe him. He doesn’t think Wilbur believes himself. “I wouldn’t have *touched* you, not like he did, I would never hurt you -”

“Maybe not like *that*,” Quackity says before the conversation goes down another path he doesn’t want, “But you would have hurt me all the same. Used me.”

He takes a deep breath: in for seven, out for eleven.

“I won’t lie and say I love myself now,” Quackity says, “But I know that I’m worth more than that. Sapnap and Karl helped me see that. They’d never do that to me. Not ever. That’s worth more than any goddess, or kingdom. You’re selfish, Wilbur Soot. No fancy connections or princehood will hide that. Not from me.”

The silence settles for a long few seconds.

“Damn,” Wilbur says, rolling his shoulders out until they’re relaxed again. “You *were* always able to see me. Maybe you know me better than I know me. Understand me. I understand you, too, though. If I’m selfish, you’re the same. We don’t get the kind of endings that your knight and librarian want.”

“We’re writing our own ending.” Quackity says firmly. “So what if I’m selfish? They love me. They don’t care. They’re selfish, too. It isn’t about our flaws, it’s about the...the care. The care we’re willing to put into each other. If I told them I needed something, they *would* do it. There’s not a doubt in my mind. I know it.”

“If it isn’t about the flaws, then what does it matter?” Wilbur asks, “What’s so terrible about wanting some status? Some power in this life?”

“No offense, Wil,” Quackity says, meaning full offense. “But wanting those things isn’t your flaw. Being a terrible fucking person for the entire time that I’ve known you is.”

Wilbur hums. He doesn't seem offended, but his tongue is sharper than a sword when he speaks.

"If I'm a terrible person, what does that make you?"

"Fuck off, Wilbur."

“Every awful thing I’ve done, you’ve done, too. Worse, maybe.”

Quackity swallows. Wilbur is right. He knows that Wilbur is right. Quackity has done far worse than even the cruelest things that Wilbur has done. He was part of the same coup as Wilbur. He’d led Eret to insanity. He’d spent weeks attempting to seduce Technoblade, and others, to benefit Schlatt, and had only failed to do his job once. He’d hated Tommy and Tubbo and Ranboo for their innocence, and he’d hurt, killed, and tormented people on Schlatt’s orders. Quackity’s hands aren’t clean, it’s only that his crimes were brushed into Schlatt’s and his boss had taken the fall for them all.

Quackity knows that. Worse, Wilbur knows it.

“We’d be so terribly good together.” Wilbur practically trips over his own words with how quickly he says them, like he’s sensed Quackity’s weak spot being prodded and is rushing to say what he’s been trying to say the whole time now that Quackity has stumbled. “We could have brought Schlatt and Kinoko down to their knees, you and me. We still could. You could be with me when I take my birthright, here and in the End. Once you see the court, you’ll see what I’m offering you.”

“No.” Quackity starts to stand up, “I don’t want you. Or Kinoko, or the End. It’s like talking to a brick wall with you.”

“You want the same thing I’ve always wanted.” Wilbur argues, leaning over to catch his sleeve, at least having the sense through his pride to not grab *him*, “You want power. You crave it. I could give it to you. More power than a fire demon knight, or even someone like George could give you. You wouldn’t be my assistant or my second in command, you’d be my partner. My equal. You’d never bow to anyone again. No one, *nothing*, could ever touch you again.”

“Except you.” Quackity spits, smacking Wilbur’s hand away, “Get *off*. I don’t want power, you *idiot*. I’ve never wanted *power*. I wanted to be *safe*. None of that, no offer you could ever

give me, would give me that. None of that, not any of it, compares to the life I've built with them. One where they love me and want to make sure I'm happy and safe. They want to protect me. And you know what, Wilb?"

Wilbur looks up at him, the moon bright in his eyes, casting a light that shines through all the shields and the disguises he puts on, showing Quackity the truth of him. A sad, broken-hearted man pining after the one thing he's pinned every hope of redemption on.

"Even without them, I wouldn't have ever asked for your help. It would have come with too many strings. Out of the frying pan and into the fire. That's what it would have been like. There is no world where I make the choice you want me to make, but *especially* not this one. Keep your power, Wilbur. It's not meant for me, and neither are you."

Wilbur doesn't blink for a long few seconds, his eyes tracing over Quackity despite the low light of the settling night. He exhales, a shaky sigh.

"I don't have a chance, do I?" He says.

"You never did." Quackity crosses his arms, holding himself against the chill. "I never loved you. You were... an escape, for a while, if that. But it wasn't a good escape, or a kind one. Just something different than the hell I was in."

"Ouch." Wilbur winces. "Too cruel, there, my dear."

"Don't call me that." Quackity says. "I'm not yours. I'm not anyone's. I'm *mine*, and I choose to give myself to Sapnap and Karl, because I love them and I trust them, and they've proven that they feel the same about me. You and me never would have worked; I wasn't enough for you, and you would have only hurt me, in the end, trying to reach for more. Your pretty words can't hide that from either of us."

And, not at all suddenly but more like a gentle wave that has been washing over him, Quackity misses them fiercely. He wants to be with them. Fighting, laughing, sleeping, making love - he doesn't care what he's doing, he just wants it to be with them.

What a stupid fight, he realizes. What a silly fear that had driven him from their room. It's taken this conversation, a reminder of exactly the kind of people he'd left behind when he'd decided to run from Kinoko with his friends, for him to remember *why* he'd done it in the first place.

"I've moved on from that time, Wilbur," Quackity says, as he steps towards the hatch into the hull of the ship. "I suggest you do the same. Whatever redemption you're looking for, I won't give it to you."

He knows Wilbur is watching him leave, but he doesn't look back. Not until he's well under the deck, a step away from the cabin the other two are in. Only then does he hesitate, his hand on the door handle.

Wilbur hasn't followed him. He allows the relief to propel him through the door and away from his fears.

They're not where he left them. The thin mattresses and pillows have been pulled off of all the beds, the blankets bunched up and laid all over the floor. There's a single lamp lit on the table, Karl with his head in Sapnap's lap, and Sapnap reading to him from an old sailing manual in a low, even tone. Karl looks mostly asleep, relaxed, finally.

They both startle when Quackity enters, but relief replaces any panic on Karl's face, and Sapnap can't help the fond look that overtakes him.

"Hey," Quackity says, softly. "Sorry, again. I didn't mean to get so upset earlier."

"It's okay," Karl assures quickly, sitting up slowly and holding out his hands, "You came back."

"I just needed some air." Quackity kneels down beside them, taking Karl's hands. The claws have mostly retreated, but his nails are still sharper than normal, and they dig into his skin when Karl squeezes. He doesn't mind. "I'm sorry."

"You were scared," Sapnap says, scooting closer to him, "I can't blame you for that."

"We're all scared," Quackity says, "Doesn't make me any less of an asshole for shouting. So, I'm sorry."

"We don't do apologies here." Karl looks up at him, sleepy and understanding. Painfully Karl. "Just kisses."

"Just kisses." Quackity repeats with a smile, leaning down to kiss Karl's lips and then tug Sapnap into a gentle, chaste kiss, too.

"You love us, we love you, now come here and cuddle me." Karl tugs his hand and Quackity, amused, allows himself to be pulled down.

He brackets Karl with his body and Sapnap's, the three of them shuffling around until they're positioned in the best place possible; which is difficult, considering the hardness of the floor and the shittiness of the mattress. But Quackity will take a sore back if it means he can have both of them within arms reach for even one night. He ends up tucking his face into Karl's neck, one arm slung over so he can gently curl his fingers in the shirt Sapnap is sleeping in.

He'd planned on telling them about his conversation with Wilbur, but he'll save it for the morning. Right now, he just wants to be with them.

"I'm so tired of all this," He murmurs, a few minutes after Sapnap blows out the lamp, when he isn't sure what is dread and what is the sea, rising and falling below him, churning in his stomach. "Why'd it have to be us?"

"Our love scares the universe," Karl slurs, already half asleep, "The gods attempt to wrest us apart because they fear what we have, dude. We'd take over the world, if they didn't try to stop us so often."

Quackity thinks about Wilbur's offer; a kingdom and then an entire realm. The silent intensity of Philza, blessed and beloved of a goddess, and the power he wields, straining just

under the surface. A deal made just to see his wife once every seven years.

“I don’t want the world,” Quackity says, “Just you two.”

“The world can go fuck itself,” Sapnap agrees, “If it doesn’t leave us alone after this, I’ll kick its ass.”

“The whole world?” Karl says, trying to sound incredulous, but is far too tired to have it be anything other than absolutely adorable.

“For you,” Sapnap says, and Quackity hears the shuffle of blankets as he moves to kiss Karl’s cheek. “For both of you.”

Maybe it’s the sleepiness, maybe it’s the sincerity, maybe it’s the fact that he’s had a very overwhelming and exhausting day, but the genuine promise in Sapnap’s voice means that Quackity feels tears well up in his eyes.

“Love you,” He says, burying his face in Karl’s neck, trying not to let his voice sound too choked up, and hoping against everything that those two words are able to encompass everything he truly feels about them.

They don’t respond aloud, but they don’t need to. Karl curls into him, ever closer, and Sapnap takes his hand, and presses careful kisses to the tips of his fingers. Here, at least, the rest of the world fades away. Here, it’s just Sapnap, and Quackity, and Karl, and they could be laying on shitty mattresses or the soft pillows of the mansion, or on the roots of trees. It doesn’t matter where they are, Quackity thinks before he drifts away, as long as they are together.

Dream isn’t surprised to see Quackity join him and Patches.

“Come to keep watch?” Dream jokes, accepting the waterskin that Quackity offers him.

“If you won’t let us drag you into the light for anything less than a war, then we’ll take turns keeping you and the old girl company.” Quackity jokes, flopping down into the hay next to him.

“Patches isn’t old.” Dream defends, patting her front hoof. She whinnies quietly, but goes back to sleep soon enough. This ride has been miserable for her, and she’s taken to mostly sleeping when Dream isn’t leading her around on short walks to stretch her legs.

“Sure, live in denial,” Quackity scoffs, accepting the bag back to take a sip of his own, before setting it between them.

A quiet settles over them, comfortable and relaxed. Quackity pulls out a deck of cards and shuffles them. Dream waits until he’s dealt a hand for their usual game of Contract Rummy to break it.

“So,” he says casually, “We’re meeting Wilbur’s mom, huh?”

Quackity's hand freezes, hovering above the pull pile. Dream slips the top card off and adds it to his hand, discarding a one of clubs.

"How did you hear about that?" Quackity asks carefully. "I just told Sapnap and Karl."

"I've been practicing," Dream says by way of explanation, "at night. Rope climbing. There's not much space on this ship, and it gives me the workout I'm looking for."

"You heard the conversation." Quackity puts it together, voice weak.

"I did." Dream admits, organizing his cards. He's already got a set, with that top card swipe. He looks at his other three cards, wondering which one will come up first.

"I..." Quackity trails off.

"I didn't mean to, at first." Dream continues, still looking at his cards. "I just wanted to make sure Wilbur would listen, if you told him to fuck off."

"He didn't." Quackity clenches his cards in his fingers, and then pulls one and discards it. It's a six of diamonds. Dream picks it up and discards his eight of spades.

Quackity pulls, discards a four of hearts. Dream picks it up and discards a nine of clubs, thinking about what to say next.

Finally, he settles on, "If you want the jokes about Wilbur's massive teenage crush on you to stop, I'll back you. Karl's going to be relentless."

"I already asked him to lay off," Quackity admits, laying another six down, this one a spade. Dream picks it up, and then lays down his hand; a set of four and a set of six. He discards the unnecessary four.

"Out." he says.

"I told him no." Quackity says, strained. "You heard that, right? If you heard the conversation, I said no. I told him to fuck off."

"Q." Dream says, putting a hand on Quackity's knee, "Of course you did. I'm not accusing you of anything."

"I told Sapnap and Karl already, too," Quackity clears his throat, "I'm - I don't want you to think... There's *nothing* going on between us. Not ever. I know Karl jokes, but it's never -"

"Stop," Dream cuts him off, calm. "You don't have to explain anything to me. I trust you. I know you'd never do that to Karl or Sap. I was just asking. I know jokes like that might make you uncomfortable, after..."

"It's fine." Quackity flusters, collecting their cards to reshuffle. "It was... whatever. Not my favorite conversation to have, but he needed to hear it. And there was a lot of stuff I needed to say, too."

“Well,” Dream accepts his new hand, fans them out to organize what luck has given him, “If you need anything, I’m here. I’m familiar with awkward confessions.”

“You?” Quackity finally smiles again, shoulders slowly relaxing, “You were born betrothed to your lordly love.”

“Not exactly,” Dream laughs, thinking back to when he was a kid. “He wouldn’t even look at me until we were much older. I never strayed, but I wasn’t the worst looking knight in the order and I’m nice enough. I had to spurn a few lonely souls in my day.”

“No,” Quackity gasps, eyes wide, “Dream, you *heartbreaker*.”

“I tried not to be!” Dream gathers his set in his hand and settles in to see what cards come up that will help to find his run. “I tried to be nice. Eventually, word got ‘round that I was a taken man, if only one-sidedly, and it stopped. For the most part.”

“Tell me more,” Quackity prompts and Dream gives in, telling Quackity about the visiting princess who’d taken a liking to him and who wouldn’t accept ‘no’ for an answer from either Dream or his royal guardians. It’s a bit of an embarrassing tale, but it had garnered him George’s romantic attention, after *years* of steadfast devotion on Dream’s part, so he’d relive having to tactfully reject a princess in front of her father and his own queen and prince consort and the court any day.

The story makes Quackity laugh, which was Dream’s goal. Dream wins the hand again but Quackity quickly catches up with the next two while they talk and waste the time away. Dream has no point, really, to the conversation; he’s just spending time with a good friend, who’s even more stressed out than Dream is right now, and that’s saying something.

“So, you think he’s telling the truth?” Dream asks, “About the queen being his mom?”

“I do.” Quackity says, watching the discard pile intensely. “He’s got no reason to lie, even if he thought he’d get one past me. All it did was open him up to…”

“Rejection.” Dream finishes for him and Quackity nods, eyes flickering up to him.

Dream sighs.

“I wonder what that was like,” Dream muses to himself, “A goddess for a mom.”

“Probably sucked,” Quackity says, cursing under his breath as he puts his hand down in frustration. He’d only needed a seven and he’d have passed on to the next hand, too.

“You think?”

“He only gets to see her every seven years, he said.” Quackity gathers the cards and shuffles again, “He’s, what...? Not even twenty-five? So he’s only got to see her maybe three times in his entire life. I saw *my* mom more than that.” He pauses. “I think.”

“Did you know her?” Dream offers his hand and Quackity passes the cards over for him to shuffle. “Your mom, I mean. I didn’t know mine. I don’t remember anything about my birth

family.”

“I don’t remember her, exactly.” Quackity carefully reaches behind him and lets his palm curl over the top of his wing, “But I remember someone caring for my wings. That must have been her, I think.”

Dream hums, dealing a new hand for them both as he listens. “I had Puffy, eventually. Then she left, too.”

“I gathered.” Quackity says and Dream smiles.

“I must seem like such a bitch,” Dream continues, words even, “Turning my nose up, when I just got her back. I should be grateful she’s still alive, that she wants anything to do with me.”

“She hurt you.” Quackity hesitates. “No matter how important the relationship was to you, you have to protect yourself from people that hurt you. Parent, lover, friend...it doesn’t matter.”

“Good point,” Dream sighs, looking down at his hand. It’s a muddle of numbers and suits. No runs, no sets. Luck’s turned against him this hand.

“I mean it.” Quackity says, firmer. “Mom or not, she...she didn’t do right by you, in the end. I don’t think that’s what happened, with me, though. I think my family got...lost. I dunno. It’s hard, sometimes, because Sapnap...”

“Yeah,” Dream laughs, “Tell me about it. Bad and Skeppy would pull the moon out of the sky for him. I get it.”

“I love them,” Quackity assures him, but Dream knows exactly what he means. Sapnap is his best friend, half of Dream’s heart - but his parents have loved him and been with him since his conception. He’s never known the lost love of someone who was meant to *be there* and wasn’t. He’d never be able to truly understand how Dream had felt, when Puffy had left. George hadn’t, either, with both of his parents there. Even if they’d been distant, they’d loved him and he’d known it.

Dream hadn’t known what to think, when Puffy left. He’d thought she cared for him, at least. And then the letter, and sailing off into the night...

“I do, too.” He promises, “But it’s hard.”

“And Karl doesn’t care.” Quackity continues, bunching three of his cards together in his hand and then setting them aside. “You know Karl.”

“I do.” Dream agrees.

“I don’t think knowing that he has this magic in him has impacted his thoughts about growing up at all. It’d be all I could think about, I think, if it were me.” Quackity admits. “What it meant about my parents or my family. If it had been random, or if it had been planned, or something. I dunno.”

“Karl’s not one to look behind him.”

“No,” Quackity says, sighing. It’s fond, though, much to Dream’s amusement. “Surely the fuck not.”

“Ah, well,” Dream pulls a card and sets it in his hand. As if struck, he spots a pattern and rearranges his card, finds himself smiling. “Fuck it. Who needs parents? We turned out okay.”

Quackity squawks a laugh. “Okay?”

“Okay enough.” Dream shrugs. “Happy, at least. Speaking for myself.”

“Yeah, I can do happy.” Quackity nods. “Now, at least. It probably would have been easier with some damn guidance, though.”

“Maybe our moms are goddesses, too.” Dream hypothesizes. “They’re just off, I dunno. Doing what goddesses do.”

“Maybe.” Quackity giggles, pulling a card and then laying out his hand.

“Damn,” Dream curses, “You fuck.”

Quackity smiles and Dream gives up his cards, settling in to play to the end.

Dream hears whispers of where they’re meant to be going. He’s never seen a map with a name like the Holy Land anywhere in the middle of the ocean, but he has to imagine that Phil’s done a lot to keep a place like this secret.

He comes out from below deck on the day they’re meant to spot land, early in the morning, so he can watch the sunrise.

Sapnap is sitting on the stern, remarkably close to where Wilbur and Quackity had been only a few days earlier.

“I’m sitting.” Dream announces his presence, dropping into the spot next to him. “Why’re you awake?”

“My fiances like George better.” Sapnap shrugs.

“Playing riddle games again, huh?”

“None of us could sleep.”

“Us, either. That’s why I sent George your way.”

“Bastard.”

Dream shrugs, leaning back on his hands.

“You ready for this?” he asks the sea.

“No.” Sapnap admits.

“Hey,” Dream knocks into him lightly. “You’re not alone. Relax.”

“Like *you’re* relaxed about any of this.”

“No,” Dream admits. “Let me do the stressing, though. You just...be you.”

“Be me?”

“Steady.” Dream holds up a fist. “I promise. I won’t let anything happen to you again. To any of you.”

Sapnap rolls his eyes, but Dream sees the way he smiles as he knocks his knuckles into Dream’s.

“How about we don’t let anything happen to each other? Drop the hero complex.”

“It’s a martyr complex, actually,”

“Drop that, too.”

Dream laughs, leaning forward to press his forehead to the railing and breathe in the salty morning air.

The sun rises, warmth kissing his skin.

Only a few minutes after the sunlight begins to paint the sea, a shout goes up from the crow’s nest. When Dream and Sapnap clamber to their feet and make it to the other end of the ship, their whole party has assembled; Tommy and Tubbo have climbed the ropes, Technoblade and Ranboo towering over everyone in the back, Phil and Karl nearly leaning over the railings as if they could somehow get a better view by doing so. Quackity and George stand back, Wilbur lost amongst his brothers.

“Welcome, all,” Puffy announces, falling from the rigging with barely a sound. “I do believe we’ve made it.”

Dream looks at her, the way the sunlight glistens in her waxen hair, the brightness of her eyes, the lines on her face that weren’t there when he was young but fit so perfectly. The smile he’d dreamt of for countless nights.

He turns away. He and Sapnap join their friend; when George offers his hand without looking, Dream grabs it, holding on tight.

In the distance is an island. Further than that, rising out of the fog, are the ruined remains of some stone structure, and he has a guess that it goes far beyond the broken walls he can see on the surface.

No matter what had happened on the ship, they made it. It's right there, in front of them.

The Holy Land.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact! The bones of the wilbur&Q conversation was the first thing written for this fic, i have been sitting waiting to release this for MONTHS

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

hello hello!

As always, let us know your theories, your ideas, your comments - it's what we live off, knowing that people are responding to our work!

(plus, thank u for all the birthday wishes last week, it was very sweet!)

Dream doesn't want to leave Patches.

It's stupid. He knows it's stupid. Outside are answers to the curse binding one of his best friends, and the only way to get back to normal. Besides, he can't realistically take a horse into the End. First of all, there's no grass, and second, she's already stressed on the ship and taking her to another dimension might be a bit of an ask. That doesn't stop him from wishing, though.

He's brushing her again, for what feels like the hundredth time in the last few days, to sooth her (and himself) when footsteps on creaking wood give away that some new company is coming to join them. He can tell by the steps that it isn't any of his friends, and he isn't sure who else would disappear to the darkness of the underbelly aside from them.

"Hey, Dream!" It's a familiar voice, though an unexpected one. Tommy pops out of the darkness, surprisingly alone as he dodges around a few tied down boxes of cargo. "Foolish snagged the guys to get the rowboat ready and roped up, so they asked me to see if you were all good."

"Yeah, I..." Dream says, his hands running through Patches' mane and watching his fingers drift through the long hair, "Give me a minute? It's not everyday you have to prepare yourself to meet a goddess, you know?"

He laughs awkwardly, expecting Tommy to disappear now that he has his answer. But there's no sound of footsteps, no quick quip. He turns his head and finds Tommy still waiting there, fingers *tap tap tapping* on a beam.

"You okay, man?" Dream asks, after a moment. Tommy's head snaps up and he gives a grin that's only about half as enthusiastic as his usual one.

"I'm a-okay, king, don't you worry about it!" Tommy says, "Just, uh - you're right, is all, you're so right! Big day! Biggest day for the biggest man, haha,"

"Tommy -"

“And Wilbur’s told us all about it and I’m absolutely not nervous - but Tubbo is, bein’ all royal, an’ all, and you know, Ranboo isn’t a fan of the water, and he’s got this thing about meeting nobles since he’s a noble, so I *told* him, I said, *Ranboo*, my man, it’s fine, it’s just like meeting anybody, it’s just Kristin, right? She’s not *just* a queen, so it’s fine, Ranboo, that’s what I said, and -”

“Tommy!” Dream says, firmly, cutting him off. “Tommy, you need to breathe, man, holy shit, I don’t think you’ve taken a breath for at least a minute.”

Tommy very deliberately gulps in air, giving Dream a challenging look.

“I don’t need to breathe! I can hold my breath longer than anyone on this ship!”

“You very much *do* need to breathe, Tommy.” Dream replies, amused. “Come on, I’m sure we don’t need to be up on deck for a few minutes. Petting Patches is good for your breathing, I promise.”

Tommy pauses for a moment, but Patches huffs, seemingly allowing him to approach, and Tommy acquiesces, scampering forward and reaching up a hand. He pats Patches’ nose awkwardly, and then must appreciate how soft she is because he keeps doing it.

“I’m not nervous.” Tommy says, after a moment. “Ranboo is just freaking out because she’s royalty, and he’s always been taught really fuckin’ uptight manners, you know.”

“I know,” Dream says carefully, because Tommy’s gone quiet, or at least, quieter, and he’s never seen the kid like this.

“I didn’t get taught any manners, not like Ranboo, or even like Tubbo, though he’s fucking forgot them all, that prick. Phil’s very *caszh*, see, and manners are *not* on the list of skills you need in L’Manburg, so the muscle’s a smidge underworked, is all.”

He pauses, and then, out of nowhere, he asks, “Puffy’s like your mum, right?”

Dream startles, and then goes still, fingers tangled in Patches’ mane.

“She raised me,” He responds.

“How did you...I dunno, act with her? Did you call her mum, or just Puffy, or, like, Captain, or whatever? ‘Cause Kristin’s Wil’s mum but Techno doesn’t call her mum, just Kristin, and Tubbo and Ranboo, you know, aren’t really technically Phil’s kids? They still have family, so they won’t be calling her mum at all, and I don’t...” Tommy sighs, resting his hand on Patches’ snout, “You’re kinda the only person I can ask, big man,”

“Glad to know I’m at least top of the list,” Dream says, and it makes Tommy snort, which he counts as a win, “What did you call her before?”

Tommy shrugs, “I’ve never visited the End before. It’s the first time for all three of us. Even Techno’s only been once before.”

“Oh,” Dream says, and there’s something bubbling up in his gut; Relief. Relief that they got this chance, that agreeing to meet up with Tommy while they made a pitstop in Pandora resulted in being able to get to the End. Relief that Wilbur is such a romantic, because Dream knows that it’s only because of Wilbur’s crush that they were able to join Phil’s family on such an important trip. “I see.”

“I mean, I’ve talked to her, kind of.” Tommy says, bringing Dream’s attention back to him, “The crows, you know?”

Dream doesn’t know, but he isn’t about to open that can of worms at this point. “Right.”

“And I can’t talk to Wilbur or Tubbo or Ranboo about it because they’ve all got mums already; Ranboo and Tubbo have two! Each! That’s too many!”

Dream hums in agreement, waiting for Tommy to keep going, but he doesn’t.

“Did you,” Dream starts, suddenly reminded of the same question asked of a different person not too long ago, “Did you ever know your mom, Tommy?”

“...Nah,” Tommy says, deliberately nonchalant, “Never had one before. There was a mate when I was a young’un - he used to say we were from a lab or some shit, but I have no idea how much of that was him bullshitting. He fucked off to the Greater SMP and I stayed in L’Manburg, so I never really got a chance to ask. So I’m kind of, ha, kinda fucked. No experience with mothers at all!”

Tommy’s voice pitches up in the way it should do when he’s telling a joke, but it cracks, just a little. He clears his throat, shaking his head like he’s clearing it out.

“I know that...I know people find me annoying. And I get it! I get it, I really do, Dream! You thought I was annoying, even! But you ended up liking me in the end. Right?”

He’s being earnest - too earnest; it’s edging into desperation. When Dream thinks of Tommy, his mind conjures an image of a child with stars in his eyes and a sword held too easily in his hand. A kid who looks up to him and Techno with reckless abandon but denies it every step of the way. A teenager he had saved from the Nether, because it was no place for any human, let alone *Tommy*. Dream had been looking forward to the chance to spar, but he’d been looking forward to seeing Tommy again just as much.

“She’s going to love you, Tommy,” He says, as sincere as he can, “Not just anybody gets adopted into *Philza Minecraft’s* family. They’re your family and they won’t just-” He stops. Pauses. Re-evaluates. “They won’t leave you, Tommy. And if they did, I would punch Wilbur and Philza in their dumb faces.”

“What about Techno?” Tommy asks, laughing, the weight around his shoulders lifting just a bit.

“I’d be dead by that point, but I’d give it a go.” Dream replies. He gives Patches one last scritch, exactly where she likes it best and then steps away, bolstering himself.

“Come on. Let's go meet your goddess mom.”

Dream isn't sure which of those is the more imposing title.

There is no dock for the *Michelle* on the island.

To reach the Holy Land, they'll have to pile into a rowboat and be transferred to shore. Phil had been too antsy to wait and he'd taken off from the crow's nest, the push-back from his wings knocking the look-out down with a shout that had reached the deck.

Dream's never seen an avian flying before; it's interesting to watch the way Phil's wings truly mimic that of a bird's. They're long enough that his dismount carries him all the way to shore without any flapping, but he must enjoy being in the air because he doesn't stop once he hits land; instead, his wings work to pull him higher into the sky. He begins to circle the island, disappearing into the mist over the far mountains and reappearing moments later as a dot in the sky.

“Wow.” Karl says, seemingly enthralled by the sight.

“He's cool, right?” Tommy smirks, smug, “You wish you were as cool as Philza.”

“I'm cooler than Philza,” Sapnap says, and Dream knows it's half just to rile Tommy up. It works; Tommy gapes like Sapnap had just smacked him down.

“You are *not*!” He says loudly, “No one is as cool as Philza, except *maybe* Technoblade, but only when he has his really big sword, you know the one, it's like the *size* of you, Sapnap, so _”

“So what, he's old and he has big wings. But I can do *this*,” Sapnap says, holding out a hand to show Tommy a piece of wood cast-off. It takes a second, but the wood soon begins to smoke and smolder where it touches his skin. Dream distinctly remembers the smell of burning feathers as he watches, but he doesn't let the memory fully surface and further drag his mood down. He forces it away and thinks about, instead, the time he'd made Sapnap roast marshmallows by hand.

“Woo, so *impressive*,” Tommy sniffs, crossing his arms and looking away. He cracks an eye open to look, though, and Dream can't help but laugh.

“It is,” Sapnap closes his fist around the wood and squeezes. When he opens it again, his entire palm is covered in soot and ash and the wood is, for the most part, gone. “By the time I'm my dad's age, this'll be a fuckin' fireball. I'll be hurling these babies all over the place when I fight people, and then you'll see what a fire demon can do!”

“Scary,” Tubbo says, stepping closer to look at the ashy remains, “How's it work? Is it just how hot your skin is? How do you not burn everyone when you touch them?”

“He does,” Quackity reaches out and Dream watches the panic on Sapnap's face as he, no doubt, rapidly cools his hand before Quackity can start brushing the ash off. “But not too bad.

He's a gentleman like that."

"Our heroic knight," Karl says, laying himself dramatically along Sapnap's shoulders, "And an especially good hot water bottle when we're cold."

"I make him steam my clothes," George adds on casually, and Sapnap scowls while Tommy and Ranboo giggle at him.

"I look forward to the day you're capable of turning me to bacon," Techno puts a hand on Ranboo's shoulders, "Come on, kid, we need to get you wrapped up for the ride to shore."

"I'll be fine," Ranboo protests, hands nervously clasping in front of him so he can play with his fingers, "We'll just make sure the water doesn't touch me,"

"We're wrapping you," Techno says firmly, steering Ranboo away from the group and back toward the hatch to down below, "Terror twins, go grab our stuff from below deck so we can get it loaded up. Wilbur, come help me get the string bean waterproofed, please."

"Awww, Techno," Tommy complains, but Tubbo's already trudging toward the stairs.

Wilbur goes without a word. Dream isn't surprised like he would have been just a few days ago; George had reported that Wilbur has been more of a ghost than anything, drifting into view occasionally but making himself scarce when Karl or Sapnap are around. Dream has a feeling it has to do with that uncomfortably brutal conversation with Quackity, and maybe a fear of meeting Karl's fist again if Karl is given the chance.

Someone clears their throat and Dream looks away from where Tommy and Tubbo disappeared to find Puffy and Foolish looking them over.

"Rowboat only holds three people at a time," Puffy says, "Foolish will be taking the kids first. Figure out who's going with Wilbur and Techno, and who's going last."

Dream looks at the others, pressing his fingers against his thigh. He thinks about his conversation with Tommy earlier.

"I'll go last." He says.

"I'll go last." George says at the same time, and then frowns at him. "Dream..."

"I have some stuff I think I need to discuss with the captain." Dream says carefully, hoping that George will let it go. He doesn't want to fight with him about it, especially not in front of Puffy, *especially* after he'd very loudly exclaimed that he belonged to George in front of her and most of her crew.

Sapnap pulls a face and, worse, George doesn't change his expression at all, but he does nod, just once. Dream will take it.

"Then I'll ride with Techno and Wilbur," George says, "I'm the least likely to capsize the boat attempting to strangle one of them."

"I can do it," Sapnap offers, "I'll be nice. You've got more reason to hate him than I do, I'll take the hit."

"It's fine." George waves him off, "I don't want to risk you falling in. We'll just sit quietly and not speak."

"I could -" Karl starts, but is interrupted by four firm 'No's.

"Is there anyone Wilbur hasn't pissed off?" Foolish asks, breaking into their conversation with a confused stare.

"He's just kind of annoying." George says blandly.

"It's complicated." Dream says, because *well, he's in love with Quackity and tried to convince him to run away a few days ago, so that's happened, and he contributed to murdering George's parents and facilitating the worst days of our entire lives, so there's that, but, also, he was a dick so Karl hates him* would open way too many doors.

"Can Wilbur please stop being the topic of conversation?" Karl requests, "I'm supposed to keep my stress levels down."

"That's a healthy choice," Quackity teases gently, "how unlike you."

"I'm the most well-adjusted man on this entire boat," Karl says firmly, "I always look out for my health, Big Q, don't worry. How is Patches getting to shore?"

"We weren't going to take her on shore," Puffy shrugs, "We were just going to bring her up here for some fresh air while you were gone and then ship off when you return."

"We'll make it a quick trip, then." Karl says and turns back to the island. "Fingers crossed, boys. This has to be worth it."

Dream crosses fingers on both hands and hopes.

Foolish's rows Phil and his boys' things to shore before he begins transporting people; from the *Michelle*, Dream sees a small pile of trunks forming as the rowboat is unloaded, Phil landing not far up the shore and jogging over to help, and then the boat gets sent back for the boys.

Ranboo has been wrapped in about five layers of thick clothing to keep him safe from water. Techno even drops his red cape around his shoulders as an extra layer against the water splash of rowing oars, much to Tommy's envy.

The transfer of Ranboo from the *Michelle* to the rowboat is tense; the layers will protect him, but they make it a bit difficult to navigate the dangling ladder and Ranboo - already an anxious boy - gets stuck about halfway down, too scared to go up again, but much too anxious to even look down, let alone move. Foolish ends up scaling the latter, tossing Ranboo's shrieking frame over his shoulder, and carrying him down, much to Dream's worried amusement. Tubbo, already in the rowboat and having been calling encouragements

the entire time, sits with Ranboo while Tommy practically leaps from the deck to the smaller boat in his excitement to get to shore.

Dream watches them, too, half out of worry and half out of distraction. He doesn't want to think about his own trip to shore. He doesn't want to think about whatever conversation he's going to have with Puffy. He doesn't know what he's feeling anymore.

Is he angry? Yes. Is he sad? Yes. Does he still miss her, even though she's right next to him? Yes. What does he want? An apology he knows will ring hollow? An understanding that she'd hurt him? What is he hoping to accomplish in a ten minute conversation that he couldn't accomplish in the two weeks they've been on a ship in the middle of the ocean together?

Whatever the answers, Dream sets them aside when the rowboat gets back.

"I don't know why I'm so stressed about this," Dream mutters, looking George over, "I'm going to see you the entire time. I could swim to you, if I had to."

"You will," George agrees, amused, "And you could."

"I think I'm going crazy," Dream admits, "Prime."

"You probably are." George agrees, reaching up to take Dream by the shoulders. "Relax. If it gets too bad, just jump out of the boat."

"Thanks." Dream rolls his eyes, "As always, your advice is invaluable."

"I had to take a lot of classes to have this much talent for strategy, you know." George smooths his cloak over his shoulders and steps back. "Don't cry when the boat starts to leave, okay? You'll get through this, hard as it is. We'll see each other again some day."

"I hope you drown," Dream bites his lip so he doesn't smile, "You're such an idiot, George."

"If I'm an idiot, what does that make you?"

"An even bigger idiot," Dream admits. "Go get on the boat."

George laughs, just a huff, and steps back, letting his hands drop. Dream resists the urge to catch them as he goes.

Wilbur and Techno make it into the boat without fanfare and George joins them; Foolish starts to chatter as soon as they're all seated, and George replies, eyes gliding over Wilbur as if he isn't there.

George isn't a prince anymore, but he still carries himself like one. Dream watches the way he sits in the presence of people he has every reason to hate and blame for what he's lost; he keeps his face calm, his body language controlled, his voice even.

He really does remind Dream of his mother, sometimes; the parts of her that Dream had respected and looked up to. Her ability to keep her cool, her unwillingness to bend to

pressures from any side, be it her councilors or foreign dignitaries. George had inherited both her stubbornness and her grace, even if he makes more use of one than the other.

“You know you don’t have to.” Sapnap says, standing next to him to watch. Dream knows he’s feeling the same anxiety - George in a boat, far away, with people they don’t trust, on a land where those same people have the advantage of past experience. Sapnap wouldn’t be able to swim to him with his flame so newly recovered, so it’s probably worse for him, even.

George isn’t a prince anymore, but neither Dream nor Sapnap had ever protected him just because he was a prince.

“Someone had to go with them.” Dream swallows.

“I meant Puffy, idiot.” Sapnap nudges him. “You don’t have to. If you have nothing left to say, then you don’t. You don’t owe her anything.”

“I know.” Dream hesitates. “But I owe myself something. I just don’t know what, yet. I want to figure it out.”

“We’ll have a few weeks more for you to try,” Sapnap reminds him. “There’s no need to do it now, right before we go talk to a queen. Let me go last. Go with Karl and Q.”

Dream slings an arm around Sapnap’s shoulders, smiling as he teases. “You always did like to put off the uncomfortable conversations, huh?”

“As long as I can.” Sapnap plays along, elbowing him in the ribs.

“Ow, *bitch*,” Dream grunts, “Rude.”

“Go with Karl and Quackity.” Sapnap repeats.

“No.” Dream says, returning his eyes to George. “Thank you, but no. I want to get it over with. If for nothing else, just so I can at least walk the ship without feeling like I’m liable to get ambushed. We need to talk.”

“Then let me go with you. Karl and Q can go on their own and meet George on shore.”

Dream weighs the option and discards it.

“I need to do this one on my own, Pandas.” He says, “But I know you’ll be there when we reach the sand.”

“We will be.” Sapnap says, quiet. They watch George.

Sapnap’s ship off is less dramatic. He goes down first so he can help Quackity and then Karl in, and Karl starts an animated conversation with Foolish almost immediately, which Foolish responds to with enthusiasm.

It leaves Dream alone with the crew and Puffy.

There is a world where different decisions were made, where a different life was lived. There's a world where being alone on this ship with this crew and its captain is the only life Dream knows.

That world isn't this one. He's a stranger on this deck, to these people, to their captain. And they're strangers to him, even Puffy. He doesn't know her. He doesn't know if he ever did.

"You wanted to talk." Puffy says, appearing at his side. He can't bring himself to look at her, keeps his eyes on the rowboat as it glides smoothly through the surf.

"Foolish is a good first mate." Dream says carefully. "He cares about the crew a lot. He does a good job."

"He does." Puffy agrees, easily going along with his choice in conversation topics. "He is. He was a gift from the sea, I think. To me, at least."

"Gift." Dream swallows. "You used to say that about me, too."

"Gift from the land." Puffy says, tone not softening. "Dug you out of that mudslide like unwrapping a present."

"A gift." Dream tastes the words, finds them bitter, like food just expired. The rot hasn't set in just yet, but it's close. He doesn't like it, but he doesn't spit it out, either.

"Is this what you wanted to talk about?" Puffy frowns, "Foolish?"

"Am I not allowed?"

"You know you are." Puffy huffs. "I wish you'd just spit it out, though. Whatever's in that head of yours."

"I don't know what's in it." Dream admits. "There's a lot. It's all mixed up."

"Simplify it."

Dream snorts, crossing his arms. "I've tried."

"I knew you'd be upset." Puffy mirrors his body language, arms across her chest. "I wanted to make it easier for you. I figured not having to watch me go would help."

"I tracked you." Dream snaps, and then forces himself to stay calm. Keep his voice level. When he continues, the annoyance isn't in his tone. "When I woke up and read your letter. Sapnap and I stole horses and I tracked you. All the way to Targay."

"That's..."

"A day's ride." Dream finishes for her, "Yeah. We were too late, obviously."

"The *Ram* was waiting for me." Puffy says.

"I was so angry." Dream swallows. "I hunted the dock, just hoping you hadn't gone yet. That I could talk to you one more time. Get my questions answered, at least."

"My letter -"

"I ripped it up." Dream scoffs. "I ripped it up, and I threw it in the ocean. All of them."

"Oh." Puffy says.

"All that first one said was that you needed to go back out to sea. That Kinoko wasn't a good fit for you, but that you knew I'd be successful. You didn't...didn't tell me why, or if you'd be back, or how to contact you. You didn't even let me say goodbye. You just disappeared in the middle of the night and you left me behind."

They let the words sit between them for a long minute.

"That isn't how I meant for you to feel." Puffy says awkwardly.

"Okay." Dream shrugs. "But it's what happened."

"Dream..."

"And then," Dream continues, still even, "You sent me another letter. Months later. And you told me about some adventures you had, and how nice it was to be back out in the water and how much you'd missed it. But you didn't say you missed me, or that you were sorry for leaving like that. You wrote like I was just supposed to be fine, so I made myself be fine and I wrote back."

"You told me about Sapnap being sick."

"More months passed. And I got another letter, and it was the same. You just asked me how Kinoko was, told me some stories. And then a year went by before I got another one. And then one or two more, and then nothing. I never heard from you again. You just disappeared to sea, again. And you left me, again."

"Mail is hard, out here." Puffy says, near a whisper.

"Is it?" Dream asks, laughing wetly.

"I wrote more than that, Dream." She says after a pause, "I did. I sent them."

"Mail is hard out here, I guess." Dream repeats. "And news must be, too, if you're just now finding out about the coup. Did you know I was missing for six months?"

Puffy turns sharply to look at him, mouth falling open.

"I was in the Nether." Dream says. "So it didn't feel like six months to me."

"*Dream.*" She says, horrified.

“Kinoko wasn’t safe.” He says, something welling up in him. “It wasn’t safe for me to be there without you. Sapnap and I were sacrifices, in the end. That’s all we were to them. The throne, George’s mom.”

“That isn’t true.” Puffy shakes her head, “That can’t be...the Nether was never meant for humans to touch. That’s impossible. I would have...felt that. I would have saved you.”

“It’s true.” Dream shrugs. “The queen and the prince consort died in the coup, but Bad and Skeppy helped get Sapnap and George out. The throne took me into the Nether. And I guess you didn’t feel it, because you definitely didn’t save me. I saved myself, and then my friends saved me. And, later, just when I was starting to be able to sleep again without waking up to the sounds of wither skeletons in my ears, we found out that Sapnap was *dying*, and I had no idea what to do or who to ask for help. His parents came, then, too.”

Puffy swallows, trying to say something only to stop. She does this twice before she’s able to speak.

“I knew they’d be good to you. Better than I could be.”

“I needed you.” Dream admits out loud, for the first time. “I needed *you*, Puffy. I was a kid, and you were my...you were the only family I had.”

“You had Sapnap and George,” Puffy turns away from him, back toward the sea, where the rowboat has begun to return to the ship, “And Bad and Skeppy, to raise you right.”

“You were my *mom!*” Dream turns to stare at her, incredulous, “It doesn’t matter if they raised me right or not, it was supposed to be *you!*”

“I *had* to leave, Dream! My deal -”

“No,” Dream cuts her off, voice firm. “Your deal didn’t make you leave the way you did. You were scared to tell me. You could have. You could have told me, and given me time to prepare for it. You could have visited, or sent more letters, or checked in more. You could have.”

“I...” Puffy trails off.

“I was a burden.” Dream says, and the truth of it burns his throat as he says it.

“*No*,” Puffy tries to deny it but Dream continues over her.

“You didn’t have a kid at your heels anymore, with me in Kinoko. You could do what you wanted, adventure where you wanted. I was an afterthought to you, once you were gone. And, eventually, I wasn’t even that.”

“Dream, never.” Puffy reaches for him but Dream steps back again.

“I wasn’t...you didn’t love me, not like I loved you. I thought we were family, but I was just...just some kid to you. You regifted me, and left as soon as you thought I was entrenched enough to go without you.”

Puffy stares at him, shocked. He sees her eyes shining, dampness gathering. It makes him feel even worse, but his own eyes are wet and he blinks rapidly to get rid of the tears. He won't cry for her. He'd promised himself years ago that he'd stop that. Tears had never changed things for him; only his own actions and the support of George and Sapnap, and Bad and Skeppy.

"Of course I love you." Puffy says, voice hoarse, hand still stretched out toward him.

"Don't lie to me." Dream snuffles. "Or yourself. It's fine. You have...you have a good ship. A good crew. A good first mate. He knows how to sail, and he's a good listener. Friendly and handsome and...yeah. Just, yeah. It's okay. I forgive you."

"Stop that," Puffy pulls her hand back, "Stop talking like that. You don't get to tell me my own feelings."

"Fine, then they aren't your feelings. But it's how you made me feel, and isn't that, I dunno. Worse? If you really loved me, and you left me like that, then...then," Dream heaves a deep breath, "What the fuck do I even say to that, Puffy?"

Puffy bites her lip, looking at him with wide eyes.

"I loved you." Dream breathes out slowly, the rapid blinking not doing much to help him hold back the tears from his voice, "I loved you so much, and you left me, anyway."

Puffy stays silent, shoulders bowing in, outstretched hand pulling in and coming up to press to her lips.

"Yeah." Dream swallows thickly. He wipes at his face roughly, clearing his throat a few times. "That's...that's what's in my head, right now. That's all I wanted to say to you."

"Ahooooooy!!" A voice calls from down below, Foolish standing in the rowboat, pulling at the ladder to make it smack against the hull and catch their attention, "Ready for the last passenger!"

"I'm leaving now." Dream says carefully. "And...I dunno. If you don't want to take us to Kinoko, maybe we can -"

"I'm taking you." Puffy says tightly, voice carefully blank, muffled by her hand.

"Okay." Dream nods, "Then, um. Goodbye. Captain."

And he climbs down the ladder without looking back at her.

"Welcome aboard, Dream!" Foolish smiles wide, and then the smile fades a little when he actually gets a look at Dream's face, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Dream sniffs, forces himself to smile back. "No, yeah. I'm okay. Just...had to talk to the captain. How's the water today?"

“Friendly,” Foolish lets go of the topic, willing to move on. Dream appreciates that about Foolish; if things were just a little different, Dream thinks he’d be really nice to get to know. And, really, why can’t Dream? What does Foolish have to do with his history with Puffy? He’s just another person picked up by a charismatic captain. If anything, they should get along better than anyone else.

Dream tries his best, as they row across the water. It’s the longest he’s talked with Foolish since they met, and he knows he was right - Foolish is funny, and casual, and his smile is handsome, and makes Dream feel at ease.

George and Sapnap are both standing at the edge of the surf, George’s shoes soaked because he’s much too close to the water.

Dream looks up from Foolish to see them. For a moment, it’s like he’s back to all those years ago when, in a fit of rage that had lasted all the way from the Kinoko capital to Targay’s port, he’d traveled to the last place he knew she’d been. He’d turned nineteen only a few months earlier. He hadn’t received a letter in over a year at that point. He’d ripped them all up, every single one of the few letters he’d gotten, and he’d hurled them into the ocean on a particularly rough-weathered day.

He’d almost drowned, jumping in to try to save the pieces almost immediately, the last bits he had left of her. It had been George and Sapnap, who’d followed him, that had dragged him out of the rough water. The three of them had laid on the beach, exhausted after nearly being dragged out by the tide and having to fight their way to shore, and Dream had raged against the sand, too, until he’d used every last bit of energy he had left. And then he’d been too numb to even cry, just staring up at the sky.

They’d leaned over him, wet from the sea, concerned for him. Neither of them had understood what he was going through, but they’d stayed with him. Sapnap had come down with a terrible cold and George had been confined to the castle for a fortnight in punishment for leaving so suddenly, but they’d come and they’d saved him regardless of the personal costs, as they always had.

It’s the *them* of that time that he sees standing on the beach now, Sapnap with the last bits of baby fat around his face, George looking so young despite being the oldest, both of them determined to stay with him and ride out the harsh yelling and the rage.

“You didn’t even need to swim.” George says, offering him a hand once the rowboat comes within reach and Sapnap sloshes into the water to help steady it so Dream can stand.

“Not when the S.S. Foolish is on the job!” Foolish pats his rowboat proudly, “Swimmin’s for chumps.”

“Thanks for the transport, man,” Dream offers a hand and Foolish shakes it firmly, enthusiastically.

“We’ll see you when you’re done with your visit,” Foolish promises, “And me an’ the ol’ rowboat will be back to get ya’.”

Dream hops into the water, using George's hand for support, and the three of them stand there to watch Foolish row his way back to the *Michelle*, occasionally waving as he goes.

Dream waits until he's far enough away that he can't quite make out his face, and then he turns around to look at everyone else on shore.

"Ready?" He asks, hoping the cool ocean air has done enough to hide the near-tears he'd been in ten minutes ago.

"We've been waitin' for you," Techno nods, a chest on one shoulder and another tucked under his arm, "Let's get movin'!"

Karl isn't sure what to expect as their party moves from the beach to the forest surrounding the ruins, but it definitely isn't for Phil to veer away from said ruins as soon as they're within the forest and, instead, take them toward the mountainous ridge that cuts through the edges of the island.

Karl is nosy by nature, values information by trade. He wants to ask Dream about what he and Puffy talked about on the *Michelle* before he joined them, because obviously something had happened, but now isn't the time nor the place. He wants to ask Phil why they're heading toward the mountains instead of the ruins, but that question, at least, he knows will be answered soon, so he bites his tongue.

For once, Karl isn't really up to chatting if it isn't to get his questions answered. He knows that his silence is unnerving Quackity, if not the others, too, but he just doesn't have the energy. He's tired today; exhausted, actually. And every step they take toward the stronghold and the End makes his stomach tighten into knots. There's an itch beneath his skin not unlike that first night, when he'd looked in the bathroom mirror and saw his fangs. The echoing call for him to go is stronger today, and there's a new urge to just be *away*. He doesn't feel much like himself.

He pulls his cloak tighter around himself, lets the familiar enchantments warm him. They're strong - the longer magic has had to settle in, the more firmly it attaches, and the better it works. Karl hopes that, one day, Dream's cloak will feel as strong as his does. It had better, if Karl's working theory that being surrounded by all the powerful enchantments over the last few months is what somehow triggered his awakening is true.

They trek through the forest for a long time; Karl takes stock of the group occasionally, but there's nothing to be overly worried about. Wilbur keeps his distance, more interested with walking between his dad and his brothers than in bothering any of them for once, and Technoblade barely pays them passing glances. There's tension in all of them and, though Karl is sure it's coming from very different places for each of them, it's blending together to form a heavy, quiet atmosphere that none of them seem willing to break, not even him or Tommy.

Sapnap has a hand on Schlong but hasn't drawn the blade yet, and Dream is intent on scanning the forest but Karl hasn't heard so much as a birdsong. It's like the entire place is

deserted of all life, human or animal or otherwise. That's what throws him off most; the idea that there is not a single other living creature on this island but them.

Karl is glad he has his friends.

Quackity lags, eventually. The terrain isn't gentle and Quackity has never had the strongest stamina for walking. Karl stays at his side and Sapnap doesn't stray far, while George and Dream fill the gap that forms between their groups, keeping both in sight. Phil doesn't slow for them, but Quackity doesn't complain, even when his breathing starts to grow heavier.

Karl is contemplating faking a hurt ankle to get them a breather when they catch up to George and Dream, who have caught up to Phil's group, who, in turn, have paused at the mouth of a small, unassuming cave.

"Oh, boy, I know how this turns out," Karl says under his breath, and it pulls a huff of amusement from Sapnap, at least.

"Before I lead us any further," Phil says, raising his voice so they can all hear him, "I need a promise from each of you that you will never, ever reveal what you are about to see. Not even on your deathbed."

He looks at Karl and his friends, but he also looks at his boys; Ranboo, who straightens up nervously, and Tubbo, who shoves his fists in his jacket and nods so hard his curls shake, and Tommy, who looks a bit green as he gives him a thumbs-up. He even looks at Wilbur and Techno, who both nod firmly.

"We promise." Dream says, and Karl is thankful that he doesn't have to speak again. He feels like he's going to vomit, actually, as Phil accepts the promises and guides them into the cave.

Karl grabs Quackity's wrist only a few steps in, a wave of dizziness sweeping over him.

Schlong's blade scrapes the stone ground as Sapnap stumbles, reaching out to steady himself against the wall.

"It's rough," Techno says, even his voice strained. "The likes of us aren't often walkin' these halls. It gets better. Breathe through it."

"What is it?" George asks, sounding slightly nervous, "What's wrong?"

"We're Netherfolk," Techno answers.

"I've never been to the Nether," Sapnap complains, slowly straightening up and sheathing Schlong.

"You're a fire demon." Wilbur says. "Your ancestors were blazes, and those are -"

"Monsters in the Nether." Dream says shakily. Karl glances his way, finds him pale and wide-eyed, lips tight with discomfort. "They shoot fire. You can harvest their corpses for rods to make -"

"Brewing stands and potions." Karl connects, hand to his aching head, "Oh. Yikes, I've been brewing with your ancestral bros, Sap. Sorry 'bout that."

"How do you know about blazes?" Phil asks, and Karl sees Dream wince.

"None of your business." Dream says shortly.

"You're human." Tubbo hesitantly says, "Why are you feeling sick, Dream?"

"It's none of your business, either," Dream says, though more gently. "Let's just keep moving."

"Maybe Tommy wasn't hallucinating when he said Dream saved him," Ranboo mumbles thoughtfully and Tommy glowers, crossing his arms and glaring around at his family.

"I *wasn't* hallucinating, you *dicks*. Now leave him alone, he said he didn't wanna talk about it!"

And, with that, Tommy sets off on his own, as if he is simply going to find the path himself.

"Toms, wait!" Phil scrambles after him and the group lurches back into motion, much to Dream's obvious relief.

Wilbur and Techno stare at Dream a little too long for Karl's liking though, and also Sapnap's, it seems, because Sapnap clears his throat loudly in what sounds more like a growl than a simple gesture. It startles Wilbur out of his stare, and Techno, at least, looks away, too.

"We're falling behind," George says and takes Dream's wrist to drag him past both of them.

With Wilbur and Technoblade now taking up the rear guard, or perhaps now guarding *them*, Karl can't help but keep an eye on them, too. In his time as a mercenary, Karl had been in a fair few scrapes. He rarely fought, more likely to out-think his opponents than out-hit them, but he was always very aware of his surroundings and, right now, every instinct he has is flaring up, telling him he's in danger.

He stumbles and Quackity catches his elbow, saving him from eating stone and probably losing some teeth. Then again, maybe the fangs are stronger than he's giving them credit for. Alarm bells ring in his head, telling him he's showing too much weakness. Enemies could be closing in at any time. They might hurt him.

They might hurt Quackity, or Sapnap, or Dream, or George. They might -

He sees red bleeding into the corners of his vision. He feels his fingertips begin to pinch and ache as his nails start to elongate and his mouth fills with saliva, the desperate need to bite before someone else bites first.

"Karl." Quackity says, sliding an arm across his shoulders, "Hey, don't you dare. We're in a cave right now. It is not the time or place, asshole. Come back."

"I'm trying," Karl whines, attempting to be playful. He thinks the desperate grip he has on Quackity's hand gives him away.

"Give him space," Sapnap says and Karl hears retreating steps, silence. He looks up and finds Sapnap kneeling in front of him, making sure they're eye to eye.

"I'm here," Karl says, "I'm trying to be here, I promise, I-"

"It's okay," Sapnap says, "Breathe with us, alright? You can do that. I'm feelin' it too, darling. If I can do it, you can."

He can feel Quackity at his back, and one of each of their hands in his and their pulses are heavy in his ears and it's pounding, *calling* him, red encroaching on his vision and -

"We've got you," Quackity says, voice pulling him back from the edge, "We're not letting you get away that easy. Find your anchor, Karl."

He blinks at the words, concentrates on them for a long few seconds. His vision clears as he follows Quackity's voice, holds their hands. When he blinks again, the red is fading and he sees Sapnap, smiling encouragingly. Karl focuses on the in and the out of his chest, on the same movement he can feel from Quackity at his back. His hands, even in their grasp, sting as the claws retract, his instincts steadying back down.

He ends up leaning forward, forehead against Sapnap's.

"I'm alright," He breathes, "Promise. Just...got caught up in my own head."

"Oh yeah?" Sapnap replies, smiling as he holds Karl's mostly-reverted hands, "What was in that pretty head of yours?"

"That there are some really brave humans out there," Karl says, "To end up producing someone as attractive as you, hotstuff."

Sapnap snorts and Quackity dissolves into laughter, so, despite the tension in each of the lines of their shoulders, Karl gives himself a metaphorical pat on the back.

"Come on," He says, standing with their help, "I'm sure they're all waiting for us. The sooner we get this done, the better."

"All good?" Dream checks when they reach him and George.

"As good as I'm gonna get!" Karl replies, forcing the pep back into his voice.

Dream nods, concern still plain on his face, and onwards they go.

The cave narrows, the deeper they get. The worse Karl feels, too, and he doesn't think the others are immune to it. He even hears Techno grunting from exertion behind them once in a while.

He can tell they're heading...down, as Phil directs them to squeeze through a few cave tunnels. The air gets mustier, danker. Gentle glowing emits from pops of bioluminescent moss, and stone shifts from the more familiar coloring to a darker, harder material until they may as well be walking through obsidian caves for how dark it is. Phil had come prepared and he holds a lantern aloft but the light is pale by the time it reaches Karl, let alone Wilbur and Technoblade.

The rest of the walk is uneventful, except for when Technoblade saddles up to walk alongside Karl, putting Karl between he and Quackity.

“Wil, go on ahead,” Techno motions, “I need to talk to them.”

“About what?” Wilbur asks, immediately suspicious.

“About Ligma.” Techno answers, voice deadly serious.

“What is -” Wilbur starts, confused, and then something clicks and he scowls, “*Techno.*”

“Bye,” Techno motions again, more emphatically, and Wilbur huffs but he listens, stomping past them to catch up with the rest of his family.

“Can we help you?” Karl asks, uncertain about what this is actually about. Is Techno going to press for more information? Just ahead of them, Dream is sending concerned looks their way.

“It’s more like can I help you, actually.” Technoblade says. It comes out dry and monotone, but Karl can sense the awkwardness, how unsure Techno is when he speaks.

“No, we’re okay.” Karl tries to assure him, “You can leave.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Techno looks straight ahead, keeping his eyes off them as he talks, “It took me a while, but I get it, now. So, I just want to say, Quackity, uh...if you want me to get Wilbur off your back, just say the word.”

Quackity stumbles, freezing with his hands tight on Karl’s arm to catch himself. Karl lurches to stop his tumble and they both stand still, exchanging a wide-eyed stare.

“What?” he asks, voice weak.

“Wilbur. If he doesn’t back off, I’ll make him.”

“What - what the hell?” Quackity says, giggling nervously, “I don’t - why - what?”

“It’s the least I can do. Since it’s my fault, right?” Techno says, dropping his voice. Karl has never heard Technoblade whisper before.

“Your fault?” Quackity shares a bewildered look with Karl.

“I thought I was bein’ nice.” Techno says haltingly. “Tellin’ you I wasn’t interested. But it wasn’t nice, was it? Your...old employer didn’t take nice to what I said, did he?”

Karl's mouth goes dry.

Quackity breathes in sharply. Karl hears his wings ruffle as they tuck in tight to his back.

"After...After that, there was something different about you," Techno says, "And even I could tell. I was working without most of the pieces for a hot minute, so it's taken me this long to figure it out, but I did." he glances at them both, but returns his eyes to the front. "So. I'm sorry. And I know it won't make up for the unkindness I did to you then, or what happened because of it. But Wilbur...Wilbur, I can handle, if you want."

Quackity gaps. Karl watches him try to speak, nothing escaping, and then watches him take a deep, deep breath and let it out slowly.

"It wasn't your fault." Quackity finally says. "I...appreciate it, but you didn't...you didn't make that happen to me. Only *he* made that happen."

"Still," Techno swallows. "I don't feel bad about stuff often, but I don't feel good about this. So, I just want to let you know that what you said to Wilbur...he needed to hear it. The gods know he wouldn't listen to me, he's got a head thicker than his dad's. And if he doesn't listen to you, let me know. I'll make sure he gets the message this time and leaves you be. Just say the word."

Quackity blinks, holding on to Karl as if Karl's the only thing keeping him from running into the cave, never to be seen again.

"Thank you." He says.

Techno nods, once, and then falls back so he's taking up the rear again, giving them space.

"Okay." Karl says carefully.

"I don't want to talk about it." Quackity says.

"Okay." Karl agrees. He reaches up, tangles their fingers together, and keeps walking. When Quackity wants to discuss it, he will. Sapnap, who was quiet the entire time, sticks close to them.

They walk on, Sapnap a silent shadow, Dream and George a front guard.

"Here," Phil says, finally, and leads them down yet again; it isn't a tilting path this time, though. Instead, he walks along stairs roughly carved into the dark stone, one hand on the wall for balance and the other holding the lantern out.

Karl hears water, in the distance, but not even the echoing groans of zombies or the far off crackle of bones from skeletons - it's not at all like the soundscape of an adventure like this would be anywhere else. There really is nothing.

He holds tighter to Quackity as they take the stairs down. They lead, after minutes of walking, to a - structure of some sort. The stronghold. Karl guesses that the ruins above are a guise and the one Phil has lead them to is the true stronghold, hidden underneath. The true

home of the legendary End Portal is still in ruins, though the walls have been protected from the elements by the surrounding rock, at least. No, it is only time that has brought cracks to the Holy Land.

Karl has read only a few stories regarding the strongholds and the End Portals; like much of the mythos surrounding the End and the Nether, they have been lost to time or re-told as stories of Prime or the island pantheon where the Solar Queen and his ilk reside. Karl knows that the portals are passageways to the End, that it often takes heroic tasks to even reach them, and that every story he's ever heard has implied they're one-way trips. Obviously, that last bit isn't quite factual, since he has Phil and Wilbur as proof that visits don't result in an eternity in the End, but he's still nervous about it.

"We'll be there soon," Phil voices when Tubbo has to call for a quick breather. Karl is grateful; even his legs had begun to ache. He can't imagine how Quackity is faring, but it isn't very well based on how hard Quackity is gripping his hand as he tries to get control of his breathing.

They take ten minutes, almost exactly, to rest. Normally, Karl would want to explore the ruins. He catches a glimpse of a library, dim but for a gentle blue glow he recognizes as soul fire, a heat source that never ceases to burn. It's worth a fortune; more money than Karl has ever had or even seen in his life. There's a part of him that begs to be let off-leash, to run around and examine the walls, see what the library holds, perhaps filch a few of the more interesting books.

The rest of him is too tired. He can barely muster up the will to look around while they wait, let alone go explore.

Sapnap scrubs a teasing hand through his curls to get his attention, tilting his head mischievously toward where Karl knows in his *bones* that library is.

Karl so badly wants to do it. Sneak away while the others are distracted, get into a bit of trouble. Maybe kiss Sapnap between the books. Find some stories he's never even heard of before.

He smiles weakly and shakes his head. Sapnap's eyes turn sad but his smile doesn't waver.

"We'll come back," he whispers, conspiratorial, and Karl finds the energy to grin.

Phil calls for them to keep going soon after and they don't stop again until they reach an iron door.

"Rules," Phil turns around to look at them all again, taking on a tone not unlike a father fully aware that he's going to be receiving a strongly worded letter about his child's behavior if he isn't careful.

Karl expects Tommy to make some crack about it, but he stays deathly silent and Phil continues without interruption.

"When we go through the portal, we'll meet endermen. Don't look them in the eyes." Phil starts, "I'm serious, all of you. Eyes down, or straight ahead. Weapons stay sheathed," Phil looks to Dream, who still has Nightmare out. "Especially those swords. You've visited other royal families before, you know the rules. All of them apply here."

"We can be cordial." George says, crossing his arms. "You're sure no one will hurt us? Or come after Karl for being in the wrong court?"

"Mostly." Phil shrugs, "Kristin gave us the okay to bring you."

"You won't feel as sick, in the actual court," Techno chimes in, "But it'll be...overwhelmin'. Keep that in mind."

"Any questions?" Phil looks around. No one asks anything and he gives up with a sigh, turning back around to push the door open.

At first, Karl thinks it's just a normal room, until he notices the oddly colored stones in the center. As they pile through the door, he gets a better look at what he's seeing and it's - almost magical, to say the least.

It's a portal. Karl has never seen a real portal before, and the stories couldn't have prepared him for *this*. He's never read anything like this before. It lays horizontally, wide enough that Karl thinks he could probably lay down straight inside of it and not touch any of the walls. It's built out of a white stone he's never seen before, with gleaming green orbs embedded into the tops, glowing a dark green. Looking closer, the orbs aren't simply green - they look like Cat's Eye gems, though the gash in the middle isn't white, but a near-black color surrounded by gentler green that eventually fades into darkness to match the pupil.

The portal hums a soft melody. It sounds *awful*, jarring and discordant, the pitch off. It gives Karl a headache that he tries to ignore as he takes in the - the *void* is the only word he has for it, the void that makes up the portal. It's the deepest black that Karl has ever seen. Specks of light in hues of red and purple twinkle within, telling him that he's unwelcome.

Their songs send ripples of fear and disgust down his spine but he does his best to ignore them.

"Wil?" Phil motions, "Lead the way, son. I'll go last, make sure you all get in okay."

"Of course," Wilbur slips from the back of the party to the front, hands buried in the pockets of his cloak. "See you on the other side, one and all,"

Karl watches him hesitate at the mouth of the portal despite the parting words. He looks over his shoulder, across his family, and then his eyes slide to Karl - no. To Quackity next to him.

For just a second, the briefest split in time, Karl thinks Wilbur looks - something. Resolute, perhaps. And then he steps over the edge and disappears into the void.

"Oh, god," Dream says, sounding ill, "I think I'm going to throw up."

"It's fine," George says, also sounding unsure. "We'll go together."

“Don’t be babies about it!” Tommy scoffs and steps up to where Wilbur disappeared, “I’m not scared! No one should be scared, this portal is completely safe. It’s totally, without a doubt, the safest portal that *I’ll* ever use, to say the least, can’t speak for the rest of you lot, but for me, personally, it’s -”

Tubbo pushes him and Tommy goes down with a scream that cuts off sharply as he disappears.

“He’s not gonna like that,” Ranboo worries, stepping up to Tubbo. Tubbo shrugs, reaching out for Ranboo’s hand.

“He’ll be okay,” he says and then jumps, dragging Ranboo behind him by the hand.

Karl watches them disappear, mouth slack.

“Holy shit,” he says out loud. The shock is practically drowning out everything else, he doesn’t even notice the singing anymore, still so focused on the fact that a real, live portal is in front of him. He doesn’t have his diary on him to write it all down; he’d left it in the enderchest, which is still strapped to Dream’s back.

“Your turn, guys,” Phil nudges them along, “You’re keepin’ me waitin’ and I’m not loving that. Time for a move on, I’d say.”

“Right.” Quackity breathes out, “Move on. Yep. Yeah. Okay.”

He goes forward, taking Karl with him, and Sapnap follows closely, Dream and George not far behind.

“It’s so big,” George says, “Why’s it so big?”

“That’s what she said.” Karl says weakly, and then lets himself fall forward, holding tight to Quackity’s hand, someone else clinging to his cloak.

If they fall, it’s no falling that Karl has ever done before.

Karl thinks of himself as an educated man, even if that education had come from stolen moments teaching himself the words on any pages he could get his hands on by candle light in whatever home he’d ended up in for the night while his paramour slept unawares. He’s familiar with lots of words, and he often twists them to do his bidding. Despite all of that, the different words and the different languages and the different stories he’s read - not a single one of them can properly describe the feeling of going through the portal.

When he blinks, there is nothing but darkness, and Quackity’s hand, and someone on his cloak, and the star-like bright spots in the void - and then he is in an all-white room, stumbling to his knees from how weak he feels, the long, dark legs of endermen in his vision and the sound of who might be Tommy gagging very close by.

“Get it all out, boss man,” Tubbo says, and Karl hears Tommy groan in response.

“I’m fine,” George says from behind Karl, sounding disoriented, “Dizzy.”

“Me, too,” Quackity agrees, “I feel like I just ran face-first into a tree but that’s about it.”

“You just crossed dimensions,” Wilbur responds, his stupid boots coming into view. Karl forces his vision to stop doubling so that he can push himself back to his feet. “You five are now in a realm that only a handful of mortals have ever had access to.”

“We appreciate it.” Dream says, teeth gritted. Karl thinks he’s just being petty, but when he manages to gather himself enough to look, Dream seems - about as bad as Karl feels. “Really.”

Wilbur smiles. “It’ll pass. Your body is just settling into the End.”

“Settle faster,” Sapanap complains, wobbling on his feet. Karl blinks again, and Phil and Techno have both joined them. Techno doubles over, hands on his knees, and gags before he manages to fight the urge off.

“There, there,” Phil pats his back comfortingly. “Everyone alive and whole?”

“No,” Tommy says roughly, “That was awful.”

“You get used to it.” Phil promises, voice amused, “Doesn’t help now but, eventually, you’ll be okay.”

One of the endermen *poofs*, and then it pops into existence right in front of Phil, chittering.

“They want to take us to the queen,” Ranboo translates.

“Everyone ready?” Phil looks around, his wings shifting and shuffling along his back in what Karl realizes is excitement.

“Yes,” Tommy wipes his mouth, straightening up, and Karl nods, hoping Dream and Sapanap feel good enough to keep going already, too.

Phil doesn’t double-check. He just starts to walk, practically skipping down the hall with a band of ill or nervous - or both - people following close behind. He overtakes the endermen almost immediately, apparently long familiar with the halls, and Karl does his best not to look up too high and risk pissing the endermen off as he practically jogs to keep up.

It isn’t a long walk, thankfully. The hallway takes them to a grand door, which Phil pauses at. The endermen pop into view to either side of him and, as one, they push the door open, and Phil practically flies into the room, the flap of his wings nearly sending them all back like bowling pins.

“Kristin!” Phil calls, his voice more animated than Karl’s ever heard it, even when he was fighting with Schlatt, “Kristin, we’re home!”

Karl cautiously steps through the door, looking around for the famed goddess queen. He finds her almost immediately, as if his eyes had nowhere else in the world to go except to her. He doesn’t even take in the grandeur of the throne room, too caught up in staring.

Somehow, the Goddess of Death doesn't seem inhuman so much as she seems *more* than human. It hurts Karl to look at her. His skin crawls. His heart beats faster. There's a visceral feeling of hostility toward her that he *knows* isn't his, though it makes a home of his body.

Her form is *giant*, Karl realizes. She's at least - they could all stack on top of each other, soles to shoulders, and they wouldn't reach her height as she stands up from her throne and steps toward them. The throne, itself, is massive; opulent and gleaming with a white stone that Karl has never seen before. Surrounding the throne is a pool of *void*, just like the portal. Karl makes sure to stay well away from it, uninterested in experiencing what going through another portal might feel like.

Somehow, her steps bring her closer and take away from her height, though not her majesty. By the time she finishes the stairs to the throne and steps from the dias, the world shifting and shimmering in her wake, she's no longer so mightily tall.

"My Queen," Phil says, and somehow the title both joking and soaked with reverence, "You're as lovely as ever. I've missed you."

The Queen stops in front of her husband and Karl feels...well, wrong is a difficult word when part of him is screaming that this whole place is wrong, but he feels like an intruder, watching something he wasn't meant to see.

"Phil," She says, and pulls him into her arms. She's more or less mortal sized now, though at least a head taller than him still, "I missed you too. Seven years feels so *long*."

"I know, I know," Phil laughs, "How are you? How's the End?"

"The same." She rolls her eyes, "Boring. Did you bring anything from the Overworld?"

"No," Phil says, teasing, "Tommy got into the trunk and drank it all."

"No!"

"Kidding, kidding," Phil says, "Only the best for you. We'll bring it out for dinner."

"My family and cocktails," The Queen presses a kiss to the top of Phil's head, their hands intertwined like they would never let go, "A perfect evening."

Phil isn't the tallest person in the world, but he certainly seems that way most of the time, his presence making him appear larger and more imposing. Here, he's smaller than his wife, and it seems like he couldn't be more thrilled at the prospect from the way his face glows with happiness.

"Now, let me see my sons." Kristin continues, playfully pushing at his arms around her waist. Phil steps away, but just barely; only enough for her to catch sight of Wilbur standing behind his father.

There's something that Karl has never seen before in Wilbur's stance; he thinks it might be shame. A child, expecting a scolding.

“Hi, Mumza,” he says, a weak joke.

“Wilbur,” She says, welcoming and happy, and there's something more there, something like reproach, but it's swallowed up by how she looks at her son like he is the warmth that seems to be missing from this cool void realm, an much-awaited return finally arrived, “Come here, Wil.”

Wilbur shuffles forwards, eyes downcast. Even Tommy is frowning, concern all over his face.

The Queen's expression doesn't change as she takes Wilbur's face in her hands and tilts it upwards.

“There you are,” She says, “You've grown so much, Wil. Even though I've been watching you, I still feel like you were just a child the last time you were here.”

“I was,” Wilbur murmurs.

“You still are,” His mother says, teasing, before pulling him into a hug. Wilbur almost flounders for a moment; he has height on his mother now that she's shrunk, and Karl is vividly reminded of how Puffy did the same to Dream, the first time she saw him again. But while they both stand still for a moment, Wilbur hugs his mother back with desperation, with love, with all the weight of something heavy. Karl doesn't know the exact source, but there's no shortage of things that Karl hopes that Wilbur feels shame for, standing in front of his mother.

“We *will* talk later,” His mother says, after they pull apart, continuing even as Wilbur opens his mouth to protest. “But know that I am so proud of you, Wilbur. I always will be.”

“Mu - Kristin -” Wilbur tries to object but the Queen cuts him off with a gentle hand.

“There will be time later.” She says firmly, “Don't deprive me of the children I haven't met yet! Most of them are your fault anyway, Wilbur.”

She steps forward and Wilbur and Phil fall into step behind her, looking every part the heir and beloved consort of the Queen of the End.

“Technoblade,” She nods, oddly formal compared to the other two, but there's a twinkle in her eyes that speaks to something more, “I trust you've been keeping my husband out of trouble.”

“I'll be honest, Kristin,” Techno says, deadpan as always, “I can count the number of times he isn't in trouble on one hand.”

“Hey!” Phil objects, “Don't dob me in, you little shit -”

“At least I can always count on you for the truth, Techno,” Kristin says, finally breaking out into a grin, “I'm sure we'll be hearing about all your adventures over dinner tonight.”

“As always,” He replies, and gives her a short, but respectful bow, moving aside to reveal the younger kids; all of them uncharacteristically silent.

“It seems as though my husband isn’t the only one you’ve had to keep out of trouble,” Despite the fact that both Tommy and Ranboo were much taller than Phil, and even had height on the goddess herself, her presence is such that even they seemed smaller. Younger. “I’ve heard a lot about you, Tommy. I’m so glad to finally see you in person.”

Karl blinks. Is this the first time they’re meeting? Tommy’s old enough that Karl would have imagined he’d been to the End at least a couple times previously. He has no idea, actually, how long Tommy, or Tubbo or Ranboo, have been with Phil. He doesn’t even know if Tommy is a biological brother to Wilbur, or adopted.

“Don’t listen to Phil about all the things I do,” Tommy says, an imitation of his usual aplomb and bluster, “He’s old, he forgets he has children. Unless it’s heroic, like saving a bunch of dogs or putting out fires or something like that. Otherwise, I never did any of it.”

Kristin’s gentle smile splits into a wide grin, even as Phil sputters out a “I’m not that old!” behind her.

“Wilbur has a good eye for brothers. I’m glad to have you with us, all of you.” She says, approvingly, and Tommy blooms under the praise, knocking his elbows into Tubbo’s side.

“See? I told you I would be the favorite -”

“Shut up, don’t hog Kristin all to yourself, I want to say hi!”

“Um,” Ranboo says, causing both Tubbo and Tommy to nearly screech with indignation, “Hi, Your Majesty.”

“While manners are appreciated,” Kristin says, loudly, and they both fall silent in her wake, but continue to wrestle in the background, “There will be no need for formalities here, Ranboo. Your family is enderborn. You belong here.” She smiles again at Tubbo and Tommy, who go immediately still with Tommy’s arm around Tubbo’s neck and Tubbo’s teeth buried in Tommy’s hand, “My realm is your home, same as it is for anyone who becomes a part of my family.”

She straightens up, turns her head, and locks eyes with Karl. The gaze hits him like a punch in the chest, the full weight of eternity and entropy bearing down on him for a split second. Something deep in his heart screams, writhing and rebelling from a person so fundamentally opposed to the power inside of him.

Quackity squeezes his hand. He feels Sapnap at his back, George’s hand on his shoulder, Dream’s presence to the side. When he blinks, the goddess’ eyes are nothing but kind.

“Are you okay?” Sapnap frets, as Karl comes back to himself, his knees wobbly but otherwise keeping himself upright, breathing heavily, “What did you *do*?”

Karl feels a flash of alarm at the rudeness of the question directed to a goddess of all people, but she merely waves it away.

“Peace, Nether-kin.” She says, and it’s obvious that she is being more formal, more regal with them as opposed to her family, even as Karl feels Sapnap bristle, “As guests of my family, you are protected while you are here, though I doubt this will be a long visit. No harm will come to you from me or my Allay.”

She looks to Karl again, but he’s prepared this time for the part of him that bubbles in deep, vicious hate. Karl beats it back as best he can, but it’s not just the stray part of him that feels a twinge of annoyance as her gaze slides from understanding to pity.

“Karl.” She says, “I’ve heard quite a bit about you. And...Sir Sapnap,” She turns her gaze to Sapnap, “The blaze-born. And King George,” she turns to George, tilting her head in a show of respect.

“Just George.” George corrects, not hesitating even with a goddess, “I’m not a prince anymore. I’m definitely not a king.”

“George, then,” She accepts. “And Sir Dream, to whom I owe a debt.”

“No debt, Your Majesty,” Dream mumbles, much to Karl’s confusion. Out of the corner of his eyes, he sees Wilbur wince, head ducked in shame.

She hums, her void-dark eyes landing on Quackity. Something shifts in her face, subtle yet obvious.

“And you must be Quackity.” She says, lips curling up in a smile.

Quackity nods quietly, discomfort in the lines of his shoulders. “That’s me.”

“Well.” She pauses. “It’s nice to meet you. All of you. Phil’s told me what you’re here for and I will do what I can but, unfortunately, I am bound by more laws than you can imagine. Still,” She winks, “We have our ways around that.”

Kristin turns back to her husband and sons.

“It’s been a long journey. You boys should get settled in before we really talk. Phil, can you show the boys to their rooms?”

“I know where my room is,” Wilbur says peevishly.

“I know,” Kristin replies, fond despite the grumpiness, “But if I’m to help our guests, it’s best that I speak with them now, rather than later.”

She sends Karl an apologetic look, “Being exposed to the magic that makes up my realm will only accelerate the transformation. And I already fear that you do not have much time left.”

A shiver of fear runs down Karl’s spine.

“We appreciate your attention,” George says, thankfully speaking up because Karl can’t make his tongue work.

“Well,” Kristin smiles again, a bit playful despite the bad news she’d just given them, “It isn’t every day that my son brings friends home. Come with me, please, I’ll show you my library.”

Library? Karl hesitates. Okay. Maybe this wasn’t the worst idea.

Karl has never seen so many books in his life, and that is saying a lot.

There’s a moment where the weight on his shoulder and the tug in his chest vanishes, swallowed up by the realization that he’s back in his natural habitat, where he would spend the rest of his life, if not for the need to move about so often.

There have to be so many *stories* hidden within these pages, and his fingers itch not with the claws threatening a return, but with the desire to sit and read and consume as much knowledge as possible before he has to leave. Despite everything, he has never felt more like himself, within reach of leather and paper, all bound up together.

The library itself feels like an optical illusion; it stretches ever onward, never-ending supplies of books of all shapes, sizes, and colors within endless shelves. It makes him dizzy just to look at it all. He can smell the rich, heady scent of paper and the brine of ink. He closes his eyes.

“Hey,” George says, elbowing him, “You with us?”

“Yeah,” He says, letting his eyes open slowly, feeling calmer, “I’m trying not to come in my pants. This place is incredible.”

Kristin snorts and Karl slaps a hand over his mouth as George elbows him. Whoops.

“I mean, it’s neat.” He says, voice muffled with embarrassment.

“Thank you.” Kristin pauses as she reaches for one of the shelves, looking like she’s simply picking books at random. A nostalgic smile weighs upon her lips.

“You remind me of Wilbur, when he was younger,” She says, which curdles the happy feeling in Karl’s stomach immediately, though he tries not to show it, “The first time he ever came here, I would have barely seen him for the rest of the trip if I hadn’t pulled him away.”

“You might not be able to pull me away,” Karl admits, instead of his usual go-to of insulting Wilbur Soot. Probably not wise in front of his mother, at least not until he got the information he was looking for, and especially not after implying that he’s sexually into her library. “This place is...I could spend forever here.”

“I’m not joking when I say that you would be here forever, if you tried to read it all.” Kristin says, resting the books she had picked out on one of the rich oak tables sitting in the middle of the library, “This place is always expanding. I have histories, myths, sciences, collections from my court and from the mortal plane through the centuries... but its first and most important function is biographies.”

“Biographies?” George asks, frowning.

“Everyone who has ever lived is here,” Kristin replies, “No one is missed. They all come to me eventually; some are longer than others, some are short but with the most thrilling stories within their pages, some are but a single line. But, no matter the length or the content, not a single story is forgotten. Not here.”

“Are we...” Quackity starts, “Are we in here?”

“One day,” Kristin replies, “Not yet. But those stories are still being written. The ink is fresh, the book not yet bound because more pages are always being added. Now, no more philosophy. We have more practical matters to attend to.”

She begins to pick through the books she’d retrieved for them, “Brief histories of the Nether and of the Inbetween so you can be more prepared for the dangers that you will face there. Biographies of some strays that completed deals, and those who chose the Empress, instead. The library is at your disposal if those prove fruitless, but this should answer some of your questions before you’ll need to leave.”

“Your Majesty,” Karl starts, ever the one to remember his manners, or at least try to when half of his body is screaming at him for even standing in her halls.

“Kristin, please,” She corrects, cracking open the book in her hand and then letting it close again as she looks at him.

“Kristin,” He says, stumbling over such a casual name for a goddess, “This is all...fantastic. Great, actually! But I don’t know if all the answers I seek are in pages.”

“I can only say so much,” Kristin starts, but Karl shakes his head.

“I know you might not be able to answer, I know that, but I *need* to ask. Either you or her.” He looks up at her, pleading, “Why now? Why *me*?”

He expects her to sigh, tell him that she can’t answer that, to look at him with pity and offer another book. He doesn’t expect guilt to flash across her face.

“I suppose I should have expected that one,” She says, setting down her book heavily. “Bear with me. This may be a little... convoluted.”

“I can take convoluted.” Karl pushes.

“Though the Empress is governed, as I am, by the rules of hospitality, there is an unspoken agreement between our Courts that has been in place for millennia that those rules do not extend to. An intrusion on her realm is not a forgivable offense.”

“An intrusion?” Quackity asks carefully, “What kind of intrusion?”

“One such as a member of my court entering her realm without permission.” She says.

George, whose eyes widen.

“Oh,” Dream’s jaw drops with his realization, “*Oh*,”

“I cannot thank you enough,” Kristin says, her eyes flicking over to Dream as Karl flounders, trying to keep up with the conclusion that he seems to have drawn, “For saving my family from their own foolishness. I never wanted my son to be pressured or swayed by the conflicts of gods, but I suppose even I can’t protect him from hubris. It runs in the family, it seems.”

“I don’t understand.” Karl cuts in, looking between Kristin and Dream, “What does Wilbur’s pride have to do with this?”

“He sat on the throne.” Dream says, and Karl’s confusion only grows.

“Okay? It spit him back out, didn’t it?”

“Sort of.” Dream shifts uncomfortably. “It...a sacrifice was needed. It took Tommy. I -” Dream eyes drift to George. “The Warden was distracted by Wilbur’s insolence. I didn’t understand it at the time, why he was so pissed off, but he was. He took Tommy and Tommy had a wooden sword. I used it and I...well. I killed him.”

“You?” Kristin startles, looking Dream over with a new interest, “You killed a member of her court?”

“Yeah,” Dream shrugs. “He was still injured and I had...potions. And then I. Well. XD saved Tommy.”

“When Wilbur sat on the throne, he showed his hand. Or, more accurately, he showed mine. Unintentionally, but done all the same.” Kristin sighs, looking down at her hands, splayed out across the cover of the top book.

Wilbur. It all fucking comes back to Wilbur.

“What did he *do*?” Karl demands, the pit of him igniting in a rage the likes of which he’s never felt before. It comes over him so fast that he gets dizzy, blood rushing to his head. He curls his hands into tight, clenching fists, presses them into his thighs. “What the fuck did *he* do that made *me* into *this*?”

“Vex and Allay,” Kristin brings a hand to her chest, presses it over where her heart might be, “we’re the same in many ways. At our core, we are jealous, possessive creatures. The Empress and I, we’ve known each other for eons. What one has, the other craves. You know, she had a human husband for a time?”

She laughs, voice twinkling. It does very little to soothe Karl’s temper. He just barely manages to bite back a snappy response. He wants to know what Wilbur has to do with this. He wants to know how Wilbur and this queen have played with his life.

“She grew bored, of course,” Kristin trails off, face going sad and soft. “She’s got a temper, my old friend. She wasn’t pleased when I married a human. I can’t imagine she was more receptive to finding out I’d had an heir. I believe that she found out about Wilbur when he sat on the throne, and it...well. It’s caused quite the stir in the status quo.”

“Why’d she come after *Karl*, though?” Quackity says, sounding a little desperate. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but that sounds like an issue between you and her. Karl has nothing to do with the throne, or Wilbur, or anything. He’d never even been to the castle before the night we destroyed it.”

“Wilbur is my heir.” Kristin explains, voice gentle but plain. “I wish that he wasn’t, that he didn’t have to take on my burden, but no matter the intentions behind his birth, he will rule the Court of the End one day. He is something that I have, that I very dearly love.”

“And she doesn’t.” Dream connects. “She wants a Wilbur. She wants an heir.”

“I can’t say for sure. I can’t ask her directly.” Kristin’s lips twist down in a frown. “But I know each death as it happens in all the realms. I feel the life leave the vessel and come to me. I feel when a new book is shelved within my library. And I’ve recognized a pattern in the strays called to the void lately.”

Karl unclenches his fists and digs his nails into his legs. The new claws pierce through his pants, bite into his skin. He uses the stinging pain to ground himself. The rage is still boiling. He wants to scream. He wants to demand that she get to the point; he wants to find Wilbur and rip into him, he wants to tell this queen and her family and the throne and the Empress all to *fuck off* and leave him alone.

He, more desperately, wants answers. So he digs his nails in until he feels warmth where his nails embed into his skin, and holds tight to the feeling so he can stay in control.

“You aren’t the only one who’s woken up when they were never meant to.” Kristin admits. “More often than not, strays *don’t*. It’s no great task, giving life to weak wills. It isn’t a great loss, not for what it’s worth in the long-term. Only *great* strays are called, usually. No offense meant, Karl, but your magic isn’t particularly special and your drive to be great isn’t astounding. On top of that, you’re only human. Under normal circumstances...”

“But your son fucked me over.” Karl finishes for her, swallowing thickly. He tastes copper. “His greed fucked me over.”

“And others.” Kristin says, eyes dropping. “Many others. The strays I’ve been receiving aren’t hearing my melody in peace. They’re...well. These are the kinds of deaths I see in times of war, not times of amity. I believe every stray worth even a glance is being called home, regardless of their strength. I believe she is searching for an heir. I believe that this is the offer you must reject, when you see the Blaze Empress. And I don’t think that will be an easy task to accomplish.”

“Sick,” Karl says. “Awesome. That’s...that’s fucking great. Cool.”

She gazes at him, and then looks them all over, void-black eyes full of apology.

“There are rooms next to the library that you can use if you want, and you can ask the endermen if you want any food or if you need assistance. You’re more than welcome to join us for dinner -”

“That won’t be necessary,” George says, clipped, “Thank you.”

Karl thinks if he sees Wilbur right now, the last of his control may snap.

“I figured.” Kristin nods, “Good luck. And...please know that, no matter what Court may lay claim to you, or how you feel about my son, you are my guests. You are welcome here. I want to help, however I can.”

She retreats, giving them their privacy.

Karl at least manages to wait until she’s out of the room before he rips his nails from his legs and punches the table as hard as he can.

He feels the bones in his hand shift, the sharp *ache* that shoots up his arm all the way to his shoulder.

He punches it again, needing to just get it *out*.

“Karl!” Sarnap catches his next punch, hand tight around his wrist to stop the momentum, “Stop! You’re going to break your hand!”

“That *fucker*,” Karl hisses, yanking free of Sarnap’s grip and backing away from the table, “I should have beat the life out of him when I had the chance!”

“Maybe don’t talk about murdering a prince in his own castle,” George sits at the table. “It would have been too late if you’d done it, anyway. I should have had him assassinated years ago.”

Karl breathes harshly, the anger swelling up, releasing, and then swelling up again. His head is spinning.

“I hate him.” he says and, to his humiliation, his voice cracks. “I *hate* him.”

“I know, darlin’,” Sarnap pulls the enderchest from his back and sets it on the table, opening it up to dig around. “Come here, drink a potion for your hand.”

“My hand is fine.” Karl lies.

“I heard the bones.” Quackity snaps, “Drink a potion, Karl. Please.”

Mutinous, Karl snatches the potion when it’s offered and gulps it down. He feels his bones shift, realign, ache in the way that freshly-set bones do. He knows that the cuts in his legs heal, too, because the stinging ceases. It makes it harder to focus without the pain. He tries to breathe through it.

In for seven. He breathes in. Out for eleven. He breathes out.

“How many times is Wilbur Soot going to try to ruin our lives?” He asks, only half rhetorical. “What is this, the third time? That we know of?”

"Well," George lifts a finger, "There was the time he staged a coup," he lifts another finger, "the time he hunted us down with his brothers and led to both XD and I nearly dying," he lifts a third, "And now this."

"Does it cancel one out if he also helped in the second coup?" Dream collapses into a chair, putting his face in his hands. "That idiot."

"He's spoiled." Karl keeps regulating his breathing, finally feeling the bubbles of rage popping. As the anger fades, so does the last of his energy. He stumbles to the table, waving off Sapnap's concerned hands. He can sit on his own, at least. "He's never been told no in his entire fucking life, so he'll fucking destroy anyone that he has to to get what he wants. Royals are just like that."

"It's true." George admits.

"I don't want to be an heir." Karl spits out, yanking one of the books to him and flipping the cover open. The first pages reads:

Biography of Porkius VII

Introduction: Blaze Empress

Post-script: Queen of Death

He closes it in disgust.

"You know the kind of person that *wants* to run a country?" Karl rants, dragging a different book to him and opening it.

The Nether: A History, it reads.

He flips to the table of contents, hoping to find something useful, and finds only incomprehensible symbols for the first half of the content page, and then a near-extinct form of common for the second half that he is only half-fluent in with his reference book on hand.

"Sociopaths, that's fucking who." He continues. "People with more pride than fucking brains. I didn't ask for this! I don't want to fucking compete for some fucking title to some fucking court that I don't fucking care about! I want to go *home!*"

Just the word, and the picture it conjures, is enough to have Karl nearly weeping. The mansion, on a nice day; Quackity in his herb garden, Dream and Sapnap sparring in their little work out yard, George and Karl enjoying the sunlight, perhaps Bad and Skeppy coming for a visit, maybe Karl's guild stopping by to say hello and bring him a few more of his books. That is the life he wants. *That* is his greatest fucking achievement. Not some stupid title, or riches, or power. Karl couldn't give less of a shit about any of what so obviously drove men like Wilbur. He wants exactly what he *has*.

His claws catch at the corner of a page and cause a small rip. Just that is enough to send him into a near hysteria, furiously pushing away from the table to stand up again.

"Karl," Quackity is there, reaching out with careful hands to catch his shoulders. "Breathe."

Karl gulps in more air, feeling hollowed out and filling up with the inescapable rage again. If he weren't so tired, he'd go after the table again, or maybe the shelves. Fuck it! Fuck all of this!

"Hey," Sapnap says, catching his attention. "Karl. Look at me."

Karl can't, for a few short seconds. He doesn't want Sapnap to see the vitriol in his eyes. But Sapnap catches his chin, turns his face, and Karl lets him.

"I know this is scary and I know you're pissed." Sapnap strokes his jaw, touch kind. "If you need to beat the shit out of a table, that's okay. But we *are* going to go home in the end. We're gonna get you out of this, and we are gonna go home."

"Trust us." Quackity says, nearly begging. "We're gonna save you."

"Of course we are," George scoffs from the table. Karl glances at him, finds that he's taken the biography and is flipping through it intently, obviously not bothered by the archaic common. "This won't be the first throne I've outsmarted."

"Why don't you get some rest, Karl?" Dream says, an order even if it's gentle. "Relax. Let us read these. When you wake up, we'll head out. You look exhausted."

"I feel exhausted." Karl admits, sniffing as the fire in his gut smolders and the rage is replaced with an upset that feels almost juvenile in the wake of it.

"Come on," Sapnap tugs his sleeve, "you can use me as a pillow."

"Yeah?" Karl asks, brightening just a little. A nap on Sapnap sounds...good. His favorite talking pillow may do him some good.

It feels a little bit much, for them to shove the table out of the way enough that there's room to pull out one of the camp beds, but they do it. Sapnap settles down on it, pulling Karl down with him, and Karl goes, almost immediately shoving his face into Sapnap's shoulder, squishing his nose flat.

"Hand me a book, angel," Sapnap requests and Karl hears a familiar gait as Quackity brings Sapnap his request. A gentle hand sweeps through Karl's curls, and then two hands massage his shoulders firmly for a few seconds.

"It'll be okay, Karl." Quackity promises. "Rest."

"I trust you guys." Karl whispers, muffled by Sapnap's shoulder. Delayed, but a truth he needs to say.

"Good. Just keep doing that." Quackity pats his back and steps away, presumably back toward the table.

Karl knows he's tired, but he doesn't expect to be out the moment Sapnap puts his arm across his shoulders.

All the same, he is.

Dream wakes up to screaming.

“Don’t! D-don’t - don’t touch me, don’t come *near me* -”

His first instinct is to reach for Nightmare, fingers closing around the hilt with muscle memory, his knees knocking into the table. Wait - table?

There’s a crick in his neck and paper stuck to his face and his sword in his hand and Karl is hunched over on the floor with both Sapnap and Quackity trying to comfort him, to little success. The camp bed lays on the floor, knocked over in the commotion.

George seems equally groggy, struggling around the corner of a bookcase with an alarmed expression before bolting straight to Dream, who immediately sheaths his sword with no enemies nearby.

“Karl, please,” Sapnap says, arms out but not touching Karl at his request, “Please, calm down, you’re okay -”

“Don’t tell me to fucking calm down!” Karl snaps, eyes blazing bright with unshed tears, “*Look* at me!”

“What’s happened?” George asks, voice still scratchy and rough from sleep, tone demanding.

“Look!” Karl points at them, and oh, his fingers are - claws? Longer and sharper and no sign of retracting despite how he’s very much speaking to them clearly right now, and oh, there’s ripped and shredded paper everywhere, and the tears in Karl’s eyes aren’t as much upset as much as they are from frustration. “Fuck! I can’t even do the most basic fucking -”

“It’s okay,” Quackity says, “It’s a book, we can fix that! Kristin can replace it, whatever, it doesn’t matter, Karl - Karl! Don’t, you’ll hurt yourself!”

Karl has twisted his hands - his claws, now - into his long hair, pulling and tearing, strands of hair falling to the floor as his claws slide through the curls, blood beading as the tips nick his scalp.

“I don’t want to,” He says, “I can’t *control* it without - It’s like it’s filling me up and - and I -”

There’s a thick bead of blood that wells up and drips down his chin as he bites down hard on his lower lip and then all there is is the sound of heavy breathing.

“Karl,” Sapnap says, heartbreak plain, “Karl...Can I touch?”

Karl nods, mutely. Gently, Sapnap reaches up and slowly, with all the care in the world, begins to untangle Karl’s claws from his hair. The moment that one of his hands is free,

Quackity is holding it, pressing kisses to his palm, the back of his hand, wiping away the blood with the hem of his cloak.

Dream watches Sapnap finish unknotting Karl's hand, and hold it just as tightly as Quackity. He can't help but kneel with them, wanting to be beside his friend.

"Are you okay?" He asks, even as George shoots him a look that says *shouldn't that be obvious?*

"No," Karl hiccups, and then his face turns, if possible, even paler, "I didn't mean to say that. What the fuck? No, I'm not okay. I didn't - what the *fuck?* No, I'm not okay!"

"It's okay," Quackity immediately, "It's alright, don't freak out, we knew this could happen -"

"What?" George asks again, "Can someone tell me what's happening!? And Karl, too!?"

"It's the transformation we read about in the biography," Dream says, "It's already progressed."

"I didn't read the biography, I was reading the history," George says, confused, and Dream squeezes his eyes shut to chase the tiredness away, trying to remember everything he and Sapnap and Quackity had read from the biographies hours ago. His head is swimming with information, with memories, with trying to apply the facts he's been reading with what he'd experienced, despite those memories now being hazy and dream-like.

"You can't lie." Dream says, "It's part of the transformation. First, it's the urge to go back to the Court. Then your body starts to change. The claws and fangs. The eyes. Then there's the...truth-telling. Vex and Allay can't lie. It's not possible for them."

"Wilbur lies." George frowns. "He lies all the time."

"He isn't Allay. Not yet." Dream shrugs. "He's just a human for now."

"*I'm* just a human." Karl growls.

"We need to leave." Sapnap says. "We don't have time for this. We got enough information. We know what to expect in the Nether, we need to head out *now*."

Dream nods, patting Karl's knee and standing up. George stands with him, face set.

"Guards!" George calls, voice sharp, and two endermen pop into view, big, purple eyes staring at them.

"We need to see the queen." George continues, "We'll be leaving, now."

One enderman bows. The other straightens an arm out, toward the door.

Dream grabs their enderchest, slinging it across his back. Determination keeps his movements calm and firm. It's all he can do, with panic boiling in his blood.

-

"I see," Kristin says, the moment they walk into the drawing room she's residing in. Much like the rest of her castle, the walls are made of blackstone and dark bricks, lit by the low hum of glowstone. Plush chairs line the pale floor; for all the otherworldliness of her court, the opulence is a strange piece of familiarity that Dream remembers from royal courts over the years.

"If that's the case," She continues, "then there is no time to waste. Wilbur told me that you have a ship chartered for Kinoko?"

George nods, because everyone else has stiffened at the mention of Wilbur and he's the only one well enough to ignore it and continue.

"You won't make it in time," She says, bluntly, "Even if you know where a portal to the Nether is -"

"We do -"

"Even with that," Kristin says, "You'll be gone by the time you arrive."

"So you're saying it's too late?" Karl asks.

"No," Kristin stands, the skirt of her dark dress cascading around her "I'm saying I can help you. Send you to Kinoko, at least. Luckily, the Kinoko capital is a place that Phil has visited on many occasions, so I should be able to get you there even though teleportation isn't something I've practiced for a while."

She inclines her head, and an enderman appears at her side. "Let Phil know our guests are leaving."

The moment he disappears, she turns back to them, "Do you have everything you need? I imagine you would like to get going sooner rather than later."

"Wait," George says, "Maybe we should talk about this -"

"Do you really think we have the time?" Sapnap says, "Really?"

"If it shaves time off our journey, we should take it." Quackity adds on, "For Karl."

George looks to Kristin, "We won't owe you, for this, will we? This isn't a deal."

"No," Kristin says, "Don't worry. If anything, I am making sure a debt is fully paid." She inclines her head towards Dream, "For saving my sons." And then to Quackity, with a look that suggests that she knows far more about Wilbur's inner turmoil than she'd ever say, "In more ways than one."

"Right." Quackity replies, weakly.

"I'll let you gather your things," Kristin says.

“We’re ready now.” Dream insists.

“Of course,” she sweeps past them, “To the throne room, then.”

By the time they reach the throne room, even fast-walking, Phil and his family are waiting.

“You can’t be going already!” Tommy insists as soon as they walk through a smaller, much less grand door, “You didn’t even come to dinner!”

“Sorry, Tommy,” Dream says as Kristin continues to the pool around her throne’s dais and kneels, “We were only here for Karl, and now we have to go. You can still write. You know where we are. Besides, Techno owes me and Sapnap a fight. You’ll see us again, alright?”

“Still,” Tubbo adds, behind Tommy, “We barely got to hang out with Big Q!”

“Someone’s clingy,” Quackity says, a tight smile on his face, ruffling Tubbo’s hair, “But it’s like Dream said, you guys know where we are, it’s not like you’re never gonna see us again.”

“The portal is ready.” Kristin declares, standing with a hand offered by her husband.

“We need to go,” George says, “Come on, guys.”

“One moment,” Dream says, moving up to Techno. The paper in his hand is torn and covered in scribbles, a frantic attempt to explain in as few words as possible as they’d jogged down the hall, “Techno, can you... can you make sure Puffy knows that we won’t be travelling with her? Give her this?”

It’s not a sentimental note. It’s short and to the point - apologising that they aren’t going to be chartering the *Michelle* after all, and asking that Patches be delivered safely to Kinoko regardless, with a promise of payment on delivery. There’s no mention of their final conversation, but there is, at least, an explanation. A reason why they aren’t returning to the ship.

It’s more than she ever gave to him.

“Sure, Dream.” Techno says, “Just don’t leave us waitin’ two years for the the next chance to spar, alright?”

“Done.” Dream says, easily.

Another figure slips into the room, as Techno ushers the kids off to the side, and Karl, by Sapnap’s side, stiffens.

“Q,” Wilbur says, only a little desperate, “Quackity, wait. Please.”

He looks different to how he did when he arrived in the End. Instead of the patched brown coat that they are used to, he has dressed in the colors of his home Court; a black high collared jacket, embroidered with dark crimson threads, twisted into intricate designs lacing across his shoulders. He looks every part a Prince of the End, right down to the way that he’s taken off his beanie and uncovered his hair.

In Dream's opinion, he still looks a bit like a dick, but no one is asking him.

Both Sapnap and Karl look like they're about to say something that definitely shouldn't be spoken about a prince in front of his family, but Quackity beats them to it.

"Wilbur," Quackity sighs, turning around, giving him more of his attention than Dream really thinks Wilbur deserves. "I don't have time for whatever you're going to say. We need to go."

"I know you do, and I won't... I won't keep you. I promise. I just wanted to give you something. In... in private, maybe?"

Quackity takes a step back towards his partners, "Nope. Sorry. Anything you have to say, you can say in front of all of us."

Wilbur freezes for a moment, but shakes himself out of it a moment later. Dream glances around. It's only his family in the room; the rest of the boys in the corner comforting Tommy, Phil speaking quietly to Kristin, presumably describing Kinoko, but Dream figures it's them, Sapnap tense and Karl even tenser, that give him pause.

"Fine. It's... It'll help all of you, anyway."

"I swear to the gods," Quackity says, "If you give me some fucking...token or some bullshit, I'm going to just give it straight back."

"You can't just give back a gift." Wilbur says, but it's a little weak, "Especially not this one."

He reaches into his bag and pulls out...something. It looks a little like a rock, except it's completely black, speckled with purple. It pulses, almost, in his hands.

"What the fuck," Quackity says, eloquently. Not that Dream has much room to criticize; his thoughts had echoed the exact same sentiment.

"I don't have time to explain this, not fully," Wilbur says, "But in essence, it's a gift. Given to me as a Prince of the End."

"What kind of a gift?" Karl's eyes narrow, and Wilbur visibly gulps.

"A helpful one. It doesn't mean anything you don't want it to." Wilbur says, going ahead and pushing it into Quackity's hands anyway, "You've made that more than clear. I respect that. I just..." He gives a crooked smile and even Dream can see that despite all of his bravado that they have become accustomed to, there are no false promises, no conniving, in Wilbur's face. Just a smile over a broken heart. "I want you to have this."

Quackity shakes his head. "I can't take this. It's too much, and it's yours. It's... it's some kind of heirloom or some shit, isn't it? *I can't take this.*"

Dream almost steps in then, as Wilbur's hand's fold over Quackity's, almost forcing him to take the rock or drop it instead.

“It’s mine to give.” Dream has never heard this voice from Wilbur before. Sincere. Soft.
“Even if I get nothing in return.”

“You won’t find your redemption in me, Wilbur.” Quackity reminds him. “Any gift won’t make up for the fact that *you* caused this. Your greed. *You*. The Empress wouldn’t have done this to Karl if you hadn’t sat on that damn throne. I don’t want your gifts, or your attempts to charm me back to your side or whatever the fuck you’ve convinced yourself of this time. It won’t work.”

“I know,” Wilbur says, and no matter how contrite he sounds, the remorse in the lines of his face, the shame that bows his head, Dream still can’t find pity in his heart for him right now. Wilbur has caused him too much grief and the newest round is much too fresh. “I know. I’ve done... terrible things with no concern for the consequences for myself or others. You were right, Quackity, you were always right. We wouldn’t have... This isn’t the time. It’s not about that. When you save your fiancé and get back to this mortal plane, feel free to throw it at my head. If not for yourself, then...to help your friends. Call it a good luck charm, from a member of the Other Side, to keep you safe in an opposing court. That’s all it is.”

Dream sees Quackity waver at the idea that it may help them.

“It’s not going to get us incinerated by the Empress, is it?” Quackity frowns, skeptical.

“No,” Wilbur shakes his head.

“Then...a diplomatic exchange.” Quackity says, placing the strange, pulsating rock into Karl’s bag, which he’d slung across his shoulder as they’d fled the library, “That’s all this is. I’m not going to thank you for it, or owe you shit.”

“No thanks needed. An exchange is all it ever will be,” Wilbur confirms, an echo of regret.
“See you around, Quackity.”

“Goodbye, Wilbur,” Quackity says, in response. It feels final. Dream hopes it is.

“The portal,” Kristin says again, catching their attention.

Dream turns away from Wilbur and his heartbreak, collecting his friends close as they approach the pool.

“This is really going to suck,” Karl whines, “I’m going to be pissed about this for years, I want you all to know.”

“As long as you’re around to be pissed,” Sapnap says, looking down to stare into the pool.

“Hold your breath,” Kristin whispers, “It helps.”

“Bye, guys,” Tommy waves, still pouting as he comes closer to watch.

Dream gives him one last wave, nods at Techno, and takes a deep breath. George is holding one of his hands, Sapnap the other. As it should be.

Then, with no abandon, no hesitation, he lets himself fall into the void.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Hello hello! Welcome back to the madness lmaooo

Anyway, we hope you enjoy this chapter (and if people get the cameos, i will be very happy (they are just for u expo <3)

For the first time, we have a couple of content warnings for this chapter as the plot ramps up for the final few chapters so implied/referenced past abuse, discussions of parental death, and discussions of past traumatic experiences (aka, Dream's time in the Nether)

And as always, the biggest thanks to Jess for continuing to beta the giant chapters we keep giving to her. She's the best and deserves all the credit.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George opens his eyes slowly, knees wobbly.

He hears Quackity groaning, Karl cursing under his breath, Sapnap's labored breathing. Dream is completely silent, but he clings to George's arm, his weight heavy against him.

"Alright?" he asks, skin tingling from head to toe.

"I -" Sapnap says, and then gags, lurching away from the group to puke in a bush.

Something about the bush pings George and he looks away from his friends, scouting out their location.

They're in a garden. It's a big garden. There are rose bushes. They're in bloom, a dull rainbow of buds just beginning to open. The paths are edged in glowstone, illuminating the walkways and the ornate benches placed strategically in places that best showcase the beauty.

It's just past dawn, judging by the way the sky is lightening into a gentle blue. It's a familiar sight; the kind of familiar that drains the blood from George's face. His heart begins to pound. His blood rushes, freezing, through his veins. He breathes in.

"We're home." he says.

"We're in Kinoko," Quackity mumbles, rubbing Sapnap's back, "That's where she said she'd send us."

“She sent us home.” George turns to look at Dream. He keeps his voice calm, though there are parts of him that feel as if he’s being pricked by every thorn in this garden all at once.

“We’re in the gardens,” Dream says, finally stable enough to recognize their surroundings. “She sent us...we’re within the castle walls.”

“Convenient,” Karl straightens up, slow like he has an invisible weight on his back trying to keep him bent. He looks - better, out of the End. Color is returning to him, though his eyes stay pale and pupil-less. His irises are no longer silver, but the same milky white as the rest of his eyes. The red lines, at least, have retreated from the corners and his skin. George lets his eyes fall to Karl’s hands. His claws are still obvious, long and vicious. They do not go away as the sun rises over them.

Sapnap joins them after a few minutes of being sick, swishing water from a waterskin and spitting it into the bushes with a disgusted grimace.

“We need to leave,” he says, “Before we’re spotted. If they see us, we -”

“*Who goes there!?*” A loud voice cuts across Sapnap’s words, and George sees him wince. He, too, feels his own body react on instinct, pulling a face.

He turns slowly, spotting the knight as she makes her way through the garden towards them, sword drawn.

“How did you get in here?” She demands, coming upon them with a lantern in her free hand. She thrusts it forward, chasing the very last of dawn’s shadows from them. George squints.

“We can explain -” Dream starts to try to reason with her, hands up to show that he’s weaponless, as if that’s ever stopped him from putting up a good fight before, but he trails off as the knight spots George and then drops her mouth open in shock.

“Um,” George hesitates. “Hello.”

The knight falls to her knee, hurriedly bowing her head and offering her sword in both hands. “Your Majesty.”

“Oh, no,” George tries to correct, “I’m -”

“You’ve returned from your retreat, my king,” The knight says, looking up at him. She’s young and her eyes are wide and bright with awe as she gazes at George. George doesn’t recognize her, but the feeling is obviously not mutual.

“My retreat?” George can’t help but repeat with confusion.

“I’m sorry,” The knight bows her head, “They didn’t tell me you’d returned.”

“We just got here.” Dream takes over, thankfully. George feels uncomfortable, with the bowing and the titles and being back...here. He’d rather Dream just...get it figured out. He turns to look at Sapnap and Sapnap gives him a look full of confusion, too. At least they’re all on the same page.

“Sir Dream,” the knight says, voice somehow *more* starstruck.

“That’s me,” Dream smiles awkwardly. “Is Ambassador Bad in town?”

“Yes, sir.” The knight nods rapidly, “The council is in session for Boatem’s envoy’s visit.”

“Boatem?” George says, feeling somehow *more* bewildered, “The hermit city? They’re *here?*”

“That’s why you’ve returned,” The knight says, face lighting up in understanding, “You’ve come to deal with the envoy! Of course.”

“Of course.” Dream agrees calmly. “Can you get the Ambassador for us? And...keep our appearance quiet, for now, if possible,” He drops his voice, “We don’t want to alert the envoy until His Majesty has had time to settle back in.”

“Of course,” The knight repeats, breathless. “I - right away, sir.”

“We’ll be in the royal study,” Dream directs her, “Please tell the Ambassador to come as quickly as he’s able.”

“Yes, sir!”

Dream waves her off and she darts away, footsteps light despite her excitement, armor making minimal noise.

They watch her disappear from view, practically skipping.

“We’ve fucked up.” George says. “This was an awful place to be dropped.”

“Bad will help.” Sapnap says firmly. “Come on, before someone else finds us just standing here. We need to go hide.”

George nods, carefully stepping onto the glowstone path from the dirt and shrubbery he’d ended up in. He keeps his eyes averted, not bothering to take in the garden as it is now. He doesn’t want to know if it’s been well maintained in his absence. He doesn’t want to know much of anything, actually; he doesn’t care why Boatem is in Kinoko and he doesn’t want to get pulled into it.

He spots Quackity, pale but determined, and feels a dull throb of sympathy. He’s not the only one that can’t stand this castle. None of them want to be here, he’d have to guess.

“We’ll need supplies.” He says as they begin to hurriedly scurry down the paths. Even after two years, George remembers every step by heart and he quickly takes them through a shortcut, a small path built into the butterfly gardens. “If we’re here, we should take advantage of it.”

“We should leave as quick as we can,” Sapnap argues, “Buy what we need in town on the way out.”

“We’d be recognized,” Dream points out, “There’s not a single person in the capital that doesn’t know George, at the very least. You and I aren’t exactly inconspicuous, either. I think George is right, we’ll have to take advantage of being here to get what we need in one place before we leave.”

“How are you doing, Karl?” George asks as they reach the edge of the gardens, slipping through a servants’ door and into the castle proper.

“Better.” Karl says, though he doesn’t *sound* better. “Wow, I sound like shit.”

“How’s the...lying thing?” Quackity asks carefully, dropping his voice in the echoing halls of the castle.

It feels like a ghost town, George thinks as he looks around. By this time in the morning, these servants’ halls should have been bustling. He doesn’t even hear footsteps, now. There’s a thin layer of dust on the floor, almost entirely undisturbed until their small party brushes through it.

“It’s bad.” Karl says, “*Fuck*. It’s bad. It’s not fixed. I’m not doing fine. Okay, I’m done.”

“Well,” Dream says carefully, “Let’s just...make the best of it. This might be the boon we were looking for.”

“Dream’s right. This will be good.” George says in agreement, thankful that he isn’t the one that can’t lie right now.

The royal study was his mother’s second-favorite room of the castle, just behind her throne room.

George thinks that he had to have spent a third of his childhood cooped up within these four walls; while he’d been brought in to shadow his mother as she worked when he’d still been a young teen, every time he’d gotten in enough trouble that it had made it past Bad and up the chain to his parents, the rare occasions when he needed to argue with her and knew no other place where the Queen and the Crown Prince could get into a loud argument without interruption.

It had been the first room he’d checked, the night of the coup. He remembers how the walls, now draped in a burgundy that sits several shades away from the red wine of George’s youth, had looked in the glow of fire. It had been the result of the first attempt on his life that night - a hired hand had dived for him as he’d come out of the room, George had dodged, but the man had caught on George’s lantern and sent the flame into the tapestries. The room had gone up quick. George still sees the dark scarring on the stone roof, remnants from the blaze, that give away how far up it got before it went out.

The desk survived, George realizes as he carefully settles behind it. He’d watched his mother work at this desk thousands of times. She’d sat where he sits as they all gather in the room. The exposed stone of the walls is soot-colored and the coverings are off and the books neatly

placed into the built-in shelves are different, but it's still the same study. George doesn't like the feeling of sitting with a ghost. He'd hoped to never see this room again.

George had held his breath as they'd passed by the throne room's entrance to get to the study isn't sure he knows how to start breathing properly again. He has to think about it, each inhale and each exhale, or his body will simply stay frozen completely still.

He sits, outwardly calm, but he can't help but clasp his hands together tight enough that his knuckles turn white. The papers strewn across the top of the desk give him pause, sending his mind whirring. The signature on most of them is familiar, yet distinctly not.

The others seem in equal states of uncertainty. Quackity hunkers down on a couch that might have fooled George, if not for the missing light stain on the arm, and Karl sits with him, sharing a single cushion between them. Dream stands by the door, hand on Nightmare, attempting to look casual. Sapnap stands by the desk, staring hard at the books. The fact that his eyes don't move at all gives him away.

George thinks about breathing.

They hear Bad coming before they see him, steps heavy but skittering as he rushes down the hall. When he bursts through the door, he's still wearing his robes, which fan out behind him as he strides in. Karl flinches, pulling up his hood and turning his body away from Bad to hide himself.

"Boys?" Bad demands before he's even through the door, "What are you *doing* here? When did you get in? *How* did you get in!?"

"It's a long story," George says carefully, standing up. "I have some questions, too, actually."

"Bad, *move* your tall, gangly ass," Skeppy demands, shoving his husband out of the way so he can make it into the room, too, wearing only a thin robe over his armored body.

"Dad," Sapnap says, voice relieved, as he comes back around the desk toward his parents. Skeppy goes straight for him, pulling him into a tight hug.

"You didn't let us know you were coming," Skeppy scolds, "We don't have rooms ready for you! We - Sap, what is this? You look a mess and you smell like a *fish market*!"

"We were on a boat," Dream clears his throat, finally letting go of Nightmare.

"A boat," Bad repeats, eyes widening in realization. "Puffy found you."

"She did." Dream admits, "but that isn't important. We're in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Skeppy narrows his eyes, stepping back from Sapnap to look around, eyes flickering over Dream, and then George, and then turning to Karl and Quackity on the couch.

"Karl?" Skeppy frowns, "What's wrong?"

“Everything.” Karl says, pulling his cloak more firmly into place, “*Fuck*, I meant that. I mean, I meant that for sure. Gods *damn it!*”

“Karl Jacobs,” Bad says firmly, “Are you hiding from us? What is going on?”

“It’s a long story,” Karl says miserably. “And I’m...not looking my best. Or my usual, even.”

“We were in Pandora,” Sapnap starts, the truth spilling from him in the face of his concerned parents, as it always does. Sapnap had always been the weak link in their plans as children; he’d start telling Skeppy everything the second he so much as stared at him, and it was only because Skeppy loved a little chaos that they were able to get away with anything at all.

As Sapnap explains, the armor falls from Skeppy’s face, revealing his shocked expression, until he’s just a man in a robe, pulled tight around his small body as he stumbles to sit down in the matching armchair next to the couch. Bad doesn’t need to sit, face a mask of patience and worry. For such a complicated series of events, Sapnap manages to condense it all into the barebones facts. He ends on, “And now we need to get to the Nether to help Karl, or he’s going to turn into a weird little monster thing and serve the Empress!”

“You went to the End?” Bad says incredulously, “You met the *Queen* of the End?”

“That isn’t important,” Dream waves the words away, “We don’t have much time left.”

“Karl,” Skeppy turns more fully to Karl, face set in a serious frown, “Let us see.”

“It’s not pretty,” Karl giggles nervously, “You don’t wanna see your favorite future son-in-law like this, Skep, I -”

“Karl,” Bad comes to sit on the coffee table in front of the couch, directly in front of Karl and Quackity, who looks conflicted as he helps Karl keep his hood down. “We just want to help.”

“There’s not much help you can give us,” Karl says. “*Damn*, I didn’t mean for it to come out like that. Um, I meant -”

“It’s okay,” Bad says patiently. “But I have fangs, you know. Maybe I’ve got some tips.”

“It’s...” Karl hesitates, “It’s the claws. Mostly, I mean. They’re...sharp.”

Bad offers a hand and, reluctantly, Karl reveals one hand and carefully puts it in Bad’s. Bad looks the claws over with the sort of non-reaction that George is jealous of, and then nods to himself.

“These look intense,” He admits. “Is the rest as scary?”

“Yes.” Karl sighs, sitting up and pulling his hood down.

“Woah,” Skeppy stands up to come closer, bending down to get a good look, “Your eyes are...empty. But you can see?”

“Perfect vision,” Karl giggles again, pulling his hand from Bad’s, “Better, even, sometimes.”

“We just need to get some supplies,” Quackity says, “Food and maybe some weapons or armor.”

“Horses.” George adds. “They’ll make getting to the portal faster.”

“You’re going *in*?” Bad asks with bright concern as the rest of the story seems to catch up to him.

“Of course we are,” Sapnap shrugs, “We need to go to the court.”

“This sounds dangerous,” Skeppy stands up, starting to walk around the room as he talks, “Are you really ready? You don’t need any more time to prepare?”

“What’s there to prepare?” Dream says evenly. “Nothing will prepare us for the Nether. It’s hell.”

“Potions,” Karl says, smacking Bad’s hands away from his mouth as Bad tries to get a look at his fangs, “We should get my potions, while we’re in town. I’ve left them all with Jimmy and there’s definitely something in there that can help if those idiots haven’t raised my stores. Fire res, at the very least.”

“Food, potions, some armor, horses,” Dream summarizes, “We can be gone in an hour. We just need your help to collect those things; I’m worried that if we try to do it, we’ll be recognized. There’s already a knight that knows we’re here, I’m not sure how quiet she’ll keep things.”

“Though I’m not too sure it matters whether everyone knows I’m here or not.” George leans on the desk, picking up one of the signed papers by the corner and lifting it up.

Bad doesn’t look guilty, but he stands up from the coffee table.

“We can explain.” He says.

“Really?” George smiles, with no humour, “Try.”

“What is that?” Sapnap frowns, but George just lifts an eyebrow.

“Tell him what it is.” He encourages, anger stirring.

“You just ran off, George,” Skeppy starts hotly but Bad shakes his head, quieting him.

“Kinoko needed to keep going, George.” Bad says gently. “Abdication isn’t as simple as leaving the crown behind. It would create a power vacuum without the proper ceremonies, or at least a will.”

“You told everyone I was on a retreat to mourn my parents,” George says, very aware of how hard he grinds his teeth together. He keeps his voice calm, doesn’t want to lose control or start an argument that they don’t have time for. He’d told himself not to bring up his own signature on a contract he’s never seen before in his life, that it was only going to open doors, but he hadn’t been able to keep it in.

“We did.” Bad agrees. “You spend the week at your ancestral home in the royal forest and I travel to you over the weekend to have you read and sign off on the actions of the Council of Leadership and make any decrees you see fit.”

“What?” Dream frowns, crossing the room to snatch the paper from George’s relaxed hold. George sits back, watching his face as he reads the paper and finds George’s signature at the bottom, dated only yesterday. The confusion fades, replaced with shock.

“What is this?” Dream asks, turning to look at Bad, “Bad?”

“I’ve been crowned in absentia.” George answers. “They made me King. I’m a Majesty after all.”

“*What!?*” Sapnap’s mouth drops open as he, too, stares at Bad. “You did what?”

“Yes,” Bad admits. “You’ve been crowned. You’re still, technically, king of Kinoko.”

“For how long?” Dream asks, carefully setting the document back on the desk. “This isn’t - there’s no way. We’ve been on a boat with Phil and Puffy and *Wilbur* - one of them would have -”

“We crowned you the morning after the coup. You’d fled by then. We announced that you were going into mourning and would be a recluse for the next year. The council decided to keep your lack of involvement under wraps, for your privacy and to make rebuilding easier. Phil, as an advisor, and Wilbur, as a member of the council, agreed to...toe the party line. We just told Puffy that you weren’t currently in Kinoko. Any assumptions she made about your kingship were her own.” Bad says, every word picked with care.

“It’s been well over a year,” George stands up, “How are you still pulling this off?”

Bad winces.

“We aren’t.” Skeppy responds, “That’s why we have our special guests.”

“We aren’t your only special guests?” Karl clicks the tips of his claws together and they clack lightly, “Are they better or worse?”

“Both.” Bad crosses his arms, then reaches up and rubs his face. The stress weighs heavily on his shoulders, George can see. He tries to gather all of the anger up and let it disperse, rid himself of it, but it feels impossible. This is no simple thing. He’s been crowned. They’d had a play-coronation. He’d been carrying his mother’s title for over a year and neither Bad nor Skeppy had thought to even let him know that they were using his name to pass laws, approve trade deals, negotiate with other bodies of authority. Who was in charge of signing his name? Did Bad get final say, like some sort of shadow king? Or, worse, did every council member have the power to stamp his signature on a piece of paper? Had they made copies of the royal seal to be passed out as party favors? Who wrote George’s supposed decrees?

More than a year, George has been king of a country he’d fled. More than a year, and they hadn’t even bothered to tell him.

“The coup was not kind to the Kinoko vaults.” Bad explains, sitting heavily in the arm chair. “Schlatt was using state funds to supply his mercenary army. He’d promised taxation breaks to the knights that supported him. Several lords were in bed with him, metaphorically, and reaped the benefits of it. The murder of the Queen and Prince Consort disrupted trades. There was a drought last summer that put nearly three entire towns out without our intervention. Snowchester withdrew support in response to Schlatt’s aggressive negotiation tactics and we’ve only just managed to bring their Queen back around. Kinoko is...”

“Up the creek,” Skeppy finishes for him, “Without a paddle. We’re poor, and our allies don’t like us much. The only thing we have going for us is that, technically, we still have a King in power and a strong army of knights for him to command. We’re making ends meet, right now, and we’re playing house well enough to make the Badlands and Snowchester believe that we’re still strong after the mix ups, but we aren’t.”

George watches them, anger and disappointment and regret warring. Finally, he says. “Fine. Use my name, I don’t care. It doesn’t matter. We just need those things and we’ll leave, you have my full permission to do whatever you want in my name.”

“Well...” Bad trails off awkwardly. “Actually, we’re...at an impasse with our other guests.”

“With Boatem.” George closes his eyes. “I see.”

“I don’t.” Karl frowns, “What’s wrong with Boatem?”

“They’re a Hermit city.” Sapnap says into the tense quiet. “They’re out in the Greater SMP, and they never leave their territory. I didn’t even know they had envoys. We always sent parties to them.”

“Out of respect for King George’s mourning, they made an exception.” Bad sighs, “Our original trade deal with them was signed by your mother, George. It’s been a happy and healthy relationship between Kinoko and the Hermit cities for decades. But those trade deals were made when Kinoko was thriving, for lack of a better word. We just don’t have the funds for the agreed-upon price for the redstone we import. But we still *need* that redstone; it has to go to our farmers and craftsmen. Kinoko doesn’t produce enough of it on our own to supply our entire crafts economy. Without it, our craftsmen won’t be able to build. Our farmers won’t be able to use their equipment. It’ll devastate us.”

“So renegotiate the price.” George frowns. “We’re an exporting nation, we have goods that would appeal to importers like them.”

“They won’t negotiate with the council.” Bad finally looks at him again, eyes worn down. “Their agreement was with the Queen. You know how they are.”

“They want to talk to George.” Dream says slowly.

“And they’ll talk to no one else. They’ve been here nearly a month and we’re no closer to fixing this than we were when they showed up. If they keep pushing, we’ll have to admit that you’re gone. It’ll open Kinoko up to all sorts of trouble.” Bad leans forward, “But...you’re here, George.”

“Not for long.” George cuts him off firmly. “We’re leaving. Immediately.”

“I know,” Bad agrees, turning to look at Karl, “Of course you are. I’d never ask you to stay, not when Karl’s in danger like this. You have places you need to go, and soon. I understand. But...it’ll take a day, right? To collect everything you need. Can you give me a day, George? Just to meet them and prove that we aren’t -”

“Doing exactly what you’re doing?” George snaps, “Puppetting me around?”

“Yes.” Bad says. “Come to the meeting. Let them see you. Help us figure out a solution. We can work on abdication, we can make it as quick as we can. A ceremony will appease them, and we can go on without your presence.”

“We don’t have time.” George says shortly.

“Twelve hours, at the most.” Bad bargains. “That will give you boys time to rest. Time to collect what you need. Time for you to see them.”

“Karl doesn’t have twelve hours.” George lies.

“I do.” Karl says, and then his face pales. “I didn’t mean that. I meant that I do. *Fuck!*”

“Thank you, Karl.” George shoots him a stare that has him closing his mouth so hard his teeth clack together.

“Sorry.” Karl whispers with a wince.

“It’s fine.” George swallows the bitterness in the back of his throat. “If you think you can handle it, fine. Whatever. I’ll meet the Boatem envoy. You have twelve hours.”

Bad looks relieved, as if George has thrown him a lifeline that he desperately needed. George feels like, in doing so, he’d lost his footing and has just gone overboard. Already, he feels the icy chill of whatever creek Kinoko is up dragging him down, too. Just like his parents, and every member of his family before that, all the way back to the one who made the deal with the Warden.

George just hopes he doesn’t drown.

They take the first four hours of the time allotted to dealing with Kinoko to get some sleep. Sapnap is grateful. He hadn’t slept at all during their time in the End and even the chilled sheets of a guest room in the castle proper are welcome, despite the nausea that being in this place again brings.

He isn’t sure who else sleeps, but he passes out for the full four hours and he wakes up to Dream sleeping soundlessly on one side of him and Quackity curled against his back. Karl sits at the desk, mindlessly clicking the tips of his nails together.

“George left,” Karl says quietly when he realizes that Sapnap is awake. Sapnap blinks sleepily at him, the words ringing in his head. He’s too muddled to make sense of them, and

then he is wide-awake.

“What?” He says, sitting up sharply.

“Bad came,” Karl responds, “And George went with him.”

“Alone?” Sapnap asks, concern immediately worming into his veins.

“Skeppy was there, too.”

Sapnap forces himself to not react on instinct. He takes a few seconds to breathe through the panic. George is fine. He’s with both of Sapnap’s parents right now, the safest place for him, barring his and Dream’s side. Even if Sapnap is kind of pissed at Bad and Skeppy, he knows George is safe right now.

Fuck, does he fucking hate that he left without one of them, though.

“Okay.” Sapnap says on an exhale. “Did you sleep?”

“No,” Karl says. His lips spasm in a fleeting frown and Sapnap recognizes it as a new tell. He’d never quite been able to point out when Karl had lied before; Karl’s face is always friendly and smooth of any emotion he doesn’t want to give away, no matter what he’s saying. This new tell, though, shows up when he’s told a truth that hadn’t meant to be spoken. It’s like a tell that lets Sapnap know that Karl had tried to lie. Karl probably hasn’t realized he’s doing it yet, for it to still be happening. Sapnap doubts it will escape Karl’s notice for long.

He knows that being robbed of his words is impacting Karl perhaps more than any other aspect of the changes he’s going through. He also knows that Karl will soon incorporate the hindrance into his speech patterns and right back to hiding what he wants hidden. Karl’s learning curve is scary, at times; Sapnap has wondered more than once what kind of world-wide chaos Karl would be if he’d been born with a status that offered him the same opportunities that Sapnap had received. Sapnap hates to admit it, but he thinks that Karl’s born station might be the only real reason he hadn’t had his stray side awoken - he’s one of the smartest people Sapnap has ever encountered. The only reason this Blaze Empress wouldn’t think Karl impressive enough to want him on her court, regardless of his human nature or lack of natural-born magic, is because he hadn’t been given the opportunity to cultivate his ambitions as he would have as a Lord.

Sapnap carefully climbs out of the bed, though he’s sure that Dream woken up the second Sapnap had shifted and Quackity is already starting to stir, too, moving under the blanket in a slow stretch. Quackity rolls into his spot and throws his arm over Dream’s chest as he stretches, a small noise of protest escaping when even Dream tries to escape the bed and take his warmth with him. Dream rolls his eyes but goes limp again until Quackity has gained enough consciousness to stand the cool of the air unaided, and only then is he allowed to sit up and leave Quackity’s clutches.

Sapnap finds Schlorg leaning against the wall next to Nightmare and straps his sword back to his belt.

“We have a list,” Sapnap says out loud. “If we get it done quick enough, I don’t think George would mind cutting out early.”

“We’ll be fast.” Dream agrees, voice rough from sleep, accepting Nightmare when Sapnap hands it over. Sapnap takes a few seconds to look Dream up and down. Something is off with him, but Sapnap doesn’t know exactly which awful part of this whole experience is causing the worst of it. He has a feeling, though, even if now isn’t exactly the time to rip that wound open. Honestly, the last couple weeks, and Dream’s stubbornness, haven’t given Sapnap much chance to even glimpse the wound, let alone worry at it.

“Horses, supplies, potions, armor.” Karl lists off. “My guild will want to know what’s going on, if I’m taking all of my potions.”

“Write them a letter,” Dream suggests, “We can deliver it when we go to collect them. They’ll want to hear it from you more than us, I’d imagine.”

“That’s a good idea,” Karl says and then raises his hands to show off his claws, “If only I had the ability to do it. I don’t think I can pick up a pen to save my life right now.”

“I can transcribe it for you,” Quackity offers, voice still soft from sleep. “And I can deliver it, too.”

“You sure?” Sapnap hesitates, “We could all go together.”

“I don’t want to be in this castle.” Quackity says, and it’s more blunt than he usually is when he’s uncomfortable but Sapnap doesn’t blame him. He doesn’t want to be in this castle, either. He’s pretty sure that all of them would rather be somewhere far, far away from this place.

“They’ll like you best, anyway,” Karl says, smiling faintly, and Quackity smiles back, just as small.

“You can’t lie, even as a joke, so I’m going to take that as fact and I’m going to rub it in Sapnap’s face.” Quackity decides, slipping out of the sheets to go to Karl’s bag, sitting next to their enderchest. He digs around for a few short seconds, comes back up with Karl’s notebook and a feather quill.

“When will I be the favorite?” Sapnap tries to joke, but his tone is subdued. He joins Karl by the desk, reaching out to gently brush curls out of Karl’s face. Karl turns into his hand, closing his eyes and pressing his nose to Sapnap’s wrist. He must think of something upsetting because his face twists as if he’s being tortured.

“Do I smell bad?” Sapnap asks, and Karl shakes his head.

“You smell too good.” he whispers. “I could eat you right up, hotstuff.”

“Maybe later,” Sapnap teases, leaning down to kiss his forehead. “If you watch the fangs, you can eat -”

“*Ahem*,” Quackity interrupts, lips twitching as he sets the pen and paper down, “We have company, idiots.”

“Dream’s said worse in front of me,” Sapnap argues, exchanging an amused glance with Karl. “I’ll save it for when we’re alone, though.”

“Oh the bright side, this gives us a good reason to try out that rope stuff, huh?” Karl jokes, clacking his nails together, and Sapnap laughs sharply, biting his lip as he steps away to muffle it.

“It’s not fair that I get told off but you’re allowed to get away with it,” Sapnap complains, “Big Q, this is blatant favoritism.”

“You can control your mouth, Karl can’t.” Quackity shrugs, uncorking an inkwell. “I know we’re all very close but Dream probably doesn’t need to know about the ropes.”

“Please don’t let me know about the ropes,” Dream agrees, snorting softly from where he’s pulling his robe from the door hook.

“Spoilsport.” Sapnap sniffs, just glad that Dream is willing to play with them a little. Sapnap has been worried about him. *Is* worried about him. Dream hasn’t been in a playful mood in weeks, because of that damn boat and its fucking captain, and all of this. If Sapnap could protect Dream from all of it, from everything that’s happened to him in the last two years, or four years, or however many years it had been for Dream - if Sapnap could take it all on himself and give Dream some sort of peace, he’d do it in a heartbeat.

He can’t, though. Not only because it isn’t possible, but because he knows Dream would never let him. All Sapnap can do is be here, and poke and prod, and hope that Dream will lean on him, if only a little. At least enough to stop himself from breaking apart.

And don’t even get Sapnap started on George. That’s a whole other basket of fucked up. Sapnap doesn’t even know where to *begin* there, so he stays here, with his fiances and Dream, and comes up with whatever plan will help them get George out of here the fastest.

“Quackity will go to town,” Dream hesitates and then pulls their money purse from the enderchest, tossing the heavy sac in his hand a few times. The coins jingle within, ready to be spent. “Collect Karl’s potions, maybe stop by the market and pick up a few things. By the time you get back, we’ll be ready to go.”

“I can do that,” Quackity agrees, “I can meet you at the eastern gate this evening. I’ll have everything I can get from them.”

“I’ll make you a list of stuff to look for,” Dream says, “It won’t be much, just some essentials from town. I’ll bet the infirmary here has been emptied and we’re going to need a lot of first aid. Just in case.”

“The three of us can find food and armor.” Sapnap tags on, “We’ll pick up the horses when we leave.”

“What if they cleaned the kitchens out, too?” Karl asks, “Should that be on the market list?”

“I doubt they’ve cleaned all of them out,” Dream shrugs. “Council members still live in the castle, if nothing else. I’ll bet they’ve kept at least a couple of the auxiliary kitchens open, and we’ll find what we’re looking for there. Then we can go to the armory, and the stables for fresh horses. We’ll have to leave word for Patches, in case we aren’t back in time.”

“That’s three weeks away.” Karl says quietly. “If we aren’t back by then, I don’t know if we will be at all.”

“Time passes weird in the Nether,” Dream waves him off without hesitation. “The biographies all mentioned that it was...wrong. The older biographies talked about it stealing decades from them in the Overworld, but the newer ones, and my experience, talked about time dragging inside. We can’t be sure how long we’ll be gone. It could be hours, it could be days.”

“It could be years.” Karl swallows.

“It could be.” Sapnap claps, “Luckily, we’ll be there together. No big deal.”

“It’s a big deal.” Karl says, good humor gone. “Decades aren’t nothing, Sap.”

“Karl -”

“That’s the rest of your parents’ lives, potentially.” Karl says. Sapnap feels his heart skip at the thought. “It’s the rest of my guild’s lives. It’s Kinoko’s shit with these dignitaries. It’s Patches’ entire lifetime. We could go in and, if we even make it out, it could be to a time that we don’t belong in. That wouldn’t even recognize us.”

“Stop.” Quackity smacks the top of the desk, the loud sound making all of them jump. “Karl, for fuck’s sake. I know things are scary right now, but we are going to fucking fix it. I don’t care if we lose decades. I don’t give a fuck if we lose centuries in that fucking place. We’re fixing you, and we’re going home. Understand?”

Karl looks at Quackity and then back to Sapnap and Dream. Karl is hard to read at the best of times, even when he doesn’t have his guard up. When he’s like this, purposefully keeping his face blank, it’s impossible.

“I can’t lie, Q.” He says, almost in apology.

“Then just,” Quackity reaches out and bonks him on the forehead with the palm of his hand, light enough that Karl doesn’t even tilt back with it. “Shut up. Trust the process.”

“Are we the process?” Sapnap says to break the tension, forcing his hands to remain straight at his sides and not clenched into fists.

“Yes.” Quackity says firmly. “So tell me what you want me to write for your guild, and then you three can go get your shit done while I get mine done.”

Karl nods meekly. “Okay. But I think it’s better if I don’t go with Dream and Sap.” He motions to himself, “I think I’ll draw too much attention. Looking like this, I mean.”

“Are you sure?” Quackity looks at Karl’s face critically, as if he might be able to see something Sapnap can’t. Maybe he can. The two of them have always been good at reading each other without mercy, in ways that Sapnap just hasn’t been able to.

“Yes, angel,” Karl confirms, reaching up to carefully, so fucking carefully, brush his palm against Quackity’s cheek, fingers held at a weird angle to keep them from Quackity’s face, “I’ll wander. Maybe try to find the library, take some time to calm down. You’ll all be quicker without me there to slow us down with all the stares I’ll get.”

Sapnap frowns, ready to argue, but Quackity nods so he gives in. If Quackity thinks it’s a good idea, and it’s what Karl wants, then Sapnap will go along with it, even if his instincts demand that he keep them both - keep all four of them - right at his side.

“Sapnap and I will head out, then,” Dream says, calling Sapnap’s attention back to him. He’s scribbling onto another of Karl’s journals with a different feather quill, and he brandishes the journal and quill both once he writes the last letter. “Here’s the list, Q. Take the enderchest with you and spend every penny if you need to, okay?”

“Can do.” Quackity accepts the list and the sack of coins. “We’ll all meet up at the gate this evening?”

“That’s the plan,” Sapnap agrees, “Karl, just...ask around for us, if you change your mind.”

“I will,” Karl says, and he can’t lie so Sapnap takes it for truth and follows Dream out of the room. He can’t help but look back one last time before the door closes; Quackity leaning over the desk as Karl quietly tells him what to write, their heads bent close, an air of determined melancholy to the room.

The door hides them from view.

“Fuck,” He whispers to himself.

“Come on,” Dream nudges him, “Let’s speedrun this. We’ll be on our way by sundown.”

“Not if Kinoko has any say.”

“Since when has Kinoko ever had a say in how we end up?” Dream smiles, and it’s not a totally real smile but it’s enough to make Sapnap feel better. It doesn’t last though, as Dream walks. His face falls into a pensive, far-away expression.

Sapnap, chewing his lip raw, follows closely, not sure what else he can do.

“We’ve got the original document,” Bad places a thick pile of papers into George’s reluctant hands, “And edits over the last few renewals. This is the new trade agreement that certain members of the council hope to convince the Boatem envoy to accept.”

“Something tells me it sucks.”

“That intuition of yours,” Bad pats his shoulder gently and then looks at him more seriously. “Truly, George. Thank you. I know this must be hard. And that I haven’t exactly set you up for success here.”

“It’s fine.” George brushes him off, turning around so his back is to Bad and he can hide his face in the papers. “Just...let me read these. When is the assembly?”

“It’s in three hours,” Bad doesn’t push against George’s dismissal. “Just enough time to read all of that and the report I wrote up about the envoy.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you want me to stay and help translate?”

“I can do it, thanks,” George says, flicking through the pages. “Thank you, Bad. That’ll... that’ll be all.”

“Of course,” Bad says, subdued. “And...I am sorry, George. I never wanted...”

“It’s fine.” George repeats, because what else could he possibly say?

“I’ll leave you to your reading.”

George listens to Bad’s retreating steps, the quiet click of the study door shutting.

He sits heavily at his mother's desk, looking over a trade agreement she’d negotiated years ago.

“Right.” he says, already feeling overwhelmed.

He makes it half an hour. That’s twenty-five minutes longer than he’d expected to get through reading about the inflating price of redstone and the current large-scale demand that Kinoko has for the powder before he gives up entirely. His feet itch to run, but the best he can do is walk around the castle, at least for a while longer, so he does.

His wandering takes him to the spots that once, a lifetime ago, he would have found Sappan and Dream; the courtyard, the main kitchens, the back storage closet where they would sit and play dice because no one ever looked there. The courtyard is silent, many of the royal guards having moved their posts to the town courtyard, according to Bad. The main kitchens are bereft of life and of any food, a significant layer of dust on the tabletops and stove, though George hears the sounds of bodies working in one of the auxiliary kitchens, at least. He finds a single abandoned die in the storage closet.

The envoys must be hosted at the ambassador quarters closer to the courthouse, for his home to be so empty. The back storage closet is lonely.

The whole castle is a ghost town. Wherever he walks, he finds only emptiness, or the echoing retreat of footsteps as an occasional servant or cookstaff makes their way through the more external halls. The halls leading toward the heart of the castle, such as the throne room and

the library, are covered in dust and ash, remains from one coup or the other that hadn't been a priority to clean up. He finds the occasional trail of footprints.

He ends up following one such trail on a long and meandering route, bored and curious, and already knowing who is waiting for him when he finally arrives at the castle library. There's only one of their group that doesn't at least know their way around the castle and these footprints are too new to be anyone but one of his.

George had loved the library, growing up. It had been the best place to hide from his duties, slipping between the shelves to evade his minders. Only Dream had ever been fast enough to catch him when he was running through this library, though Sapnap had always been better at sniffing him out when he was hiding.

George doesn't need to sniff to find where the footprints lead, even though they disappear into the plushness of the library's carpet. His target is front and center, sitting at the head librarian's desk.

Karl looks up at him from where he had been flicking through a rather dull-looking tome on border disputes. Or rather, it seems like he'd been *trying* to flick through it; his claws make it difficult for him to turn the pages and he's taking each one carefully, like it's an ancient masterpiece rather than a common history.

"I thought you were busy pretending to be king," He says as George approaches, smiling.

It's more than a little unsettling, now. His fangs seem to be here to stay, having never shrunk back even after leaving the End. His eyes are milky white, and without the previous human warmth to them, there's only that piercing, analytic expression. Still, he softens when he sees George, and the expression on his face does more to reassure George than anything else could. It's still Karl. It's still his friend.

"It got boring." He shrugs, "They want me to go to a meeting this afternoon. Where are the others?"

"Stocking up," Karl replies. "Q's gone to make sure we actually have access to potions this time around, and Dream and Sapnap went to go and show off how much food they can carry through the castle."

George chuckles, but he can't help but feel a little disappointed, "Damn it. We can't run before I get pulled in."

"We're stuck here until they all get back, anyway. I'd rather go into the Nether as prepared as possible," Karl smiles, lopsided, "Less stress all round."

"Dream survived." George says, "For months. Without anything on him."

"Unfortunately," Karl says, "We aren't all Dream. Right now, we have time to kill until our boys are back, and I want a tour."

George blinks, "A tour?"

“George, dude,” Karl says, “Even if there wasn’t some kind of supernatural instinct telling me to move literally all the time, I’d be getting antsy.”

“If there wasn’t that instinct, then we wouldn’t even be here,” George says, and he can’t help but feel bitter about it. He quickly hurries to correct himself, because even in just a split second, Karl’s face has crumpled. “I don’t mean that it’s your fault. It’s not your fault, Karl.”

“It’s a little bit my fault,” Karl sighs.

“It isn’t. It’s... it’s stupid gods and fate and people wanting to interfere in our lives.” George says, “And, yeah, maybe I wish that it didn’t end up with us here, of all places, but if it means we get you back to normal, then we’ll do it.”

“What if we can’t ever go back to normal?” Karl asks quietly.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, they seem pretty intent on keeping you here,” Karl goes for a laugh, but it falls flat between the shelves, “What if they don’t let you go?”

“We’ve run before, we’ll do it again.” George says, firmly. “I am *not* staying here. Not for a single hour longer than necessary.”

Karl hums, but he doesn’t seem entirely convinced.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, George,” He starts, and George gets a sinking feeling, “I don’t really want you to be king either. But the throne is gone. You don’t have to lose anything to some hell dimension anymore. You’d be good at it, I know it. When we were...” He swallows nervously, “The last time we came back here, the whole way back, you showed you’d make a good king. A good leader.”

“When they dragged us back into the castle,” George says, “They separated us as soon as you got dragged away. Sapnap got a fucking hole in the ground, but they put me and XD in my dad’s rooms. They look right over the courthouse, and I could see the crowd. The people I was born to protect and rule, flocking to watch my execution.”

Karl winces. “That must have been kind of a mindfuck.”

“I guess.” George shrugs. “A good king would have cared. Someone like my mother...she would have wanted to escape, so she could stop Schlatt and save her country.”

“You didn’t?”

“All I was thinking about,” George admits, “Was Sapnap and XD. You and Quackity, too, kind of, but they were my priority. Getting Dream back for Sapnap, making sure none of us died. I was thinking about where we should run to next, actually. I’d hoped that whatever Schlatt was up to, Kinoko’s throne would be enough to distract him from us so we could just...get away.”

“Oh.” Karl hesitates. “So Kinoko, for you...?”

“It’s a cage.” George looks around at the library. He’d loved it, growing up, because every book had been an escape. He’d found the short story about a prince running away with his peasant-girl bride that had inspired his idea to run away with Dream and Sapnap in this grand room. He’d planned so many routes in this room, so many different ways to escape with them. He’d dreamed in this room of a life away from it.

“A pretty cage, at least.” Karl looks around, too.

“I don’t care about Kinoko, Karl.” George says. “I don’t care about the people, or if they’re instituting a democracy or another monarchy, or whatever the fuck. I want to go home. I want to stay home, and not have to think about this place or these decisions. I don’t want to be a king, even one crowned and ruling in absentia. Which, by the way? Is fucked up, right? That’s not just me?”

“No, it’s definitely a ‘what the fuck’ moment,” Karl agreed readily, nodding, “It was a dick move.”

“This whole thing is a dick move,” George says, running a hand down his face, “And now I have to formally abdicate. It’s gonna be a whole *thing*.”

Karl tilts his head, gesturing for George to continue.

“Well, for a start, we’d have to come back,” George says.

“Come back?”

“Karl,” George says, fixing him with a stare, “You really think I’m going to mess about trying to get myself abdicated while you’re dealing with *this*?”

“You just went on a rant about how much you hate being king!”

“You’re an idiot, Karl,” George says, shaking his head, “An absolute idiot. The council will want a ceremony. Bad is lying; if they had it their way, it would be a week-long event. I hate being king, and I don’t want to be, but even I have limits.”

He gestures towards the door, starting to walk, and Karl follows.

The problem with castles is that there’s often a lot of empty rooms that no one uses, ornate and beautiful and useless. The lack of use is clear - no one is actually living in this part of the castle. It may be that no one has even visited this part of the castle since Schlatt’s fall and George’s desertion. The dust shakes off the wall with each step, and cobwebs line the ceilings. There has at least been some attempt to preserve the castle; when they poke their head into the third best drawing room, adjacent to the library, the furniture is covered in white sheets. Down the corridors, the paintings and tapestries have been covered as well, lines of faceless ghosts.

“For example,” George says, because the hallway is too quiet with just their footsteps, “We almost joined forces with Wilbur to help him rise up in the council in exchange for an easy abdication later.”

Karl makes a face, “Gods, you really were desperate.”

“Not desperate enough to actually say yes.” George says, “We talked about it but we still had options. I thought... I thought we’d have more time.”

He pauses, right at the entrance to the tower that once housed the royal chambers. “Maybe if I had said yes, he wouldn’t have helped to murder my parents.”

The silence that settles on them both is cloying, heavy. George’s tongue is heavier. He can hear his parents’ screams ringing in his head. In lieu of saying anything, he starts to climb the stairs.

“You don’t,” Karl ventures, “really talk about them much.”

“There isn’t much to say, honestly,” George replies, “My mother was the Queen. She was busy. My father did his best, but he had his own duties as Crown Prince. They wanted me to be something I wasn’t. I really only spoke to them if they pulled me into doing royal duties with them. I didn’t know them, not really. How do you even miss someone you didn’t know?”

He shrugs off the subject, and pauses at an old, familiar, dark oak door. “Come on. My old bedroom’s just through here. Let’s see what is still standing.”

He opens the door, slow. The last time he was here, he had been woken up by the sound of shouting and the smell of smoke. The last time he was here, he’d hidden in his private reading nook, hidden behind a swinging bookshelf. He’d ducked into the nook hundreds of times before - usually to kiss Dream when they should have been working or to escape some duty or another. The last time, though, he’d been hiding from people who wanted to kill him.

He had emerged after his would-be attackers had left and seen the mess they had made of his room just looking for him, so he’d run to his mother’s study to find her because that was where she usually spent her nights. It had been empty and, panicked and heart pounding after escaping an attack, he’d returned to this tower and gone to his mother’s rooms. There, through the open door, he’d seen them. Eret and Schlatt had been in the room, too, and while his mother had fought with mercenaries in her own bedroom, his dad had seen him and yelled for him to run. To find Sapnap and Dream and escape while he still could.

George had run. He’d heard them screaming as he’d disappeared back down the stairs. By the time he reached the bottom, the screaming had gone quiet.

“George?” Karl’s hand rests on his shoulder, gentle despite the sharp claws. “Are you okay?”

George shrugs him off, forcing his breathing to even out. “I’m fine. Let’s go in.”

There’s no more mess, which is the first thing he sees. Someone has taken the time to set the chairs straight, even repair the one that had been broken in the search. The bookshelf-door is swung open, letting sunlight from the reading nook window stream in. The rug has been patched, the corners of his bed turned down and made up, as if it was just waiting for him to return to it again.

Not that he would have, he realizes. If he had stayed, if the coup had failed, this room would have remained empty. He would have never returned to this room, but gone further, up the stairs to his mother's rooms, the rooms of the monarch. Would they have cleaned up the blood? Replaced the sheets and repaired the furniture and left it, just as they left his room, as if its owner would return any day? Or were there still remains there? Would he find anything of his parents, since not even their ashes had made it to his hands? Some sort of proof that they're no longer here?

"Oh my gods," Karl says, snapping George out of his reverie, "Is that a stuffed creeper toy?"

Someone had even gone through the effort to fix his things, George thinks, vaguely, as he forces on a smile. The last time he saw that creeper, it had been as ruined as everything else.

"Yeah," He replies, watching as Karl heads to his desk and lifts the yellow stuffed toy up, grinning as he examines it. It's covered in careful stitches; worse-for-wear, but whole. "Got it when I was a baby, apparently. His name is Gavin."

Karl bursts out laughing, "Gavin?! Why Gavin?"

George shrugs, "It made sense when I was a kid."

He sits down heavily on the bed as Karl makes his way around the room, pointing out pieces of a life that George has left behind. Karl seemingly examines every corner of the room, picking up trinkets and asking for their stories. Half-broken wooden pickaxes from the time they made a tree fort. Remains of fireworks from a Bonfire Night that Sapnap stole and set off in the middle of the training ground. A heart of the sea that Dream had handed over as a prize when they beat him at a manhunt for the first time.

"The view is incredible, too." Karl says, "Look! I can see where my library is! Do you think we could spot Q from here?"

"Maybe." George says, and he knows he sounds lackluster when Karl turns to look at him.

The silence stretches but George doesn't know how to fill it. He's just...tired, maybe.

"I know things suck right now, so this is kind of an obvious question, but are you okay?" Karl eventually ventures, "You know we wouldn't let them keep you here. Never."

George huffs a laugh, "Considering you organized a small coup in less than twenty-four hours to save us last time, I don't think they'd stand a chance."

"You didn't answer my question." Karl says. "Are *you* okay, George?"

"Why does it even matter? Whatever happens, we're going home in the end. It's fine."

Karl pauses for a moment, then sits down heavily on the floor, his knees drawn up to his chest as he leans back against the wall.

"Will we?"

George furrows his brows, annoyed by the question.

“Don’t tell me you’re seriously considering accepting her offer,”

“Of course not!” Karl grumbles, “I’m just scared it’s going to be too late!”

His jaw clamps shut. It’s clear that he hadn’t meant to say that last part.

“Go on.” George prompts, “You said you could do twelve hours. If we need to leave now, then -”

“You can’t sense it.” Karl says, quietly, hugging his knees, “You guys can’t. The worst part is that it feels *right*. It feels like who I’m meant to be. Like the person you guys love is already gone and I’m just a monster in his place.”

“*Karl*.” George says.

“I’m sorry,” Karl says, immediately, “You hate it here and you’re here for me, and Dream is going to go into the Nether for me, and Quackity was stuck with fucking Wilbur for me, and Sapnap is tearing himself apart for me, and I don’t even... I’m not even *me*. This can’t end happily, not anymore.”

“Karl -”

“I love them so much,” Karl presses a clawed hand over his heart, “I love them so much and even that feels wrong. It feels too much, like the kind of love that a *Vex* would have, not a human.” He spits out the word like it’s poison, “I could fucking cope with it, maybe, if I could lie to them. If I could tell them that I still had *hope*, that I thought we had a chance and this wasn’t all for nothing, then it might be something, but *no*, I don’t even have my *words* anymore. I can’t even pretend to be the person they deserve. A person that isn’t bitter and cruel and has hope that we all come out of this alive. I don’t want them to see the person I was before I met them, the person that I *am*.”

“Karl!” George stands up, raising his voice, “Stop talking, for Prime’s sake!”

There’s rage bubbling up in his chest and frustration on his lips and an overwhelming exhaustion weighing down his shoulders, but he crosses the room in a few quick strides and drops in front of Karl without letting any of that through.

“Listen to me. Don’t interrupt me, and just listen, okay?” He rests his hands on Karl’s knees, bringing his attention up to him, “We know you’re an asshole. That’s never been in question. We’re *all* assholes. And Sapnap and Quackity are head over heels for you anyway. You’re an idiot to think that that matters in the first place.”

Karl chokes on something; maybe a laugh, maybe a sob.

“You’re our friend, Karl. That’s it. No ifs, no buts. We told you we would come with you before, and I’ll tell you again if you need us to. None of this,” He gestures behind him, out to his childhood but further, down to the envoy he doesn’t care about, down to the kingdom he never wanted, “matters more than getting you back to normal.”

Karl bites down on his lip, blood welling as he nicks his skin and making him wince and stop to tongue at the bite. When he speaks, it's hushed.

"I don't know if there's any going back to normal, after all of this."

"What did I *just* say -"

"Even if we survive," Karl stresses, "*Even* if we manage to leave with a deal that means I don't have to give up something I love, I don't -" He swallows. "I don't know how much of me will be left."

"Karl," George starts, but Karl cuts him off.

"I literally can't lie right now, don't tell me I'm wrong."

"Well, you are." George replies, pompous in all the ways he knows would normally make Karl laugh, or jump to the bait, "You're wrong."

"How?"

"Because I said so. And for some stupid reason, they made me king, so you have to do as I say."

Karl laughs weakly, "You're a terrible king. I don't hate you. Fuck. I mean I really, really don't hate you. *Fuck*."

"If I was a worse person, I would be messing with you so much right now."

"Oh, fuck *off*, George."

They sit there in amicable silence for a few more moments. George settles off his knees, still on the floor, and leans on Karl's knees as he waits for him to calm down.

"I can't help but notice," Karl says, "That you still haven't answered my question, *George*."

"Which one?"

"The only one that really mattered." Karl tips his head up, eyes watchful, "You okay, man?"

George sighs, "We're all fucked up. My issues aren't killing me."

"But they're hurting you," Karl says, softly, "Doesn't that count?"

"It's always going to hurt," George says, "End of. It's just... It's harder. Now." There's a lump in his throat that wasn't there before, and he viciously swallows it down, unwilling to deal with it. He'd kept expecting to hear them. He'd sat in her study and, for the entire time, he'd felt like he was just waiting for her to walk in and tell me off for sitting in her chair.

"Bad looked at me like I was her." George allows himself to say.

“But you’re not her,” Karl says, and it’s gentle. George appreciates the delicacy, especially when Karl is going through his own situation.

“I want to go *home*,” George says, and he hates how much he sounds like a child, quiet and plaintive, sitting on the floor of the bedroom he grew up in. It’s an admission he isn’t sure he should have given up. The spot where he’d held it inside is immediately filled with a new secret he can’t speak.

“I know,” Karl says, “Me too.”

George rubs the bridge of his nose, annoyed with himself.

“I promised Dream that I’d never let the Nether take him again and now we’re waltzing straight back in.” He says. Karl opens his mouth but George interrupts, not interested in any more self-sacrifice. “Don’t you dare suggest we stay behind. I won’t let you go in alone, and neither will Dream. It just sucks.”

“Yeah,” Karl echoes, “Yeah, it sucks.”

“I don’t know if I’d rather be in there or stuck here doing kingly shit. Both are terrible options.”

Karl laughs weakly, “Literal hell or being the most powerful person in the kingdom. Tough choice.”

George snorts, but then the weight of the words settle on him.

“That’s not true. I know which I’d prefer.” He shakes his head, “I would rather go into hell than be king. It makes me feel sick just thinking that.”

“Can I ask a tough question?” Karl asks, after a moment.

“Because your questions have been so light-hearted up ‘til now.” George says, sighing tiredly, “Go on then. Hit me.”

“Is it because of the responsibility of being king? Or is it because of your parents?”

George sits back against the wall and he thinks about if he wants to answer the question.

It hurts to think of his parents. He hasn’t given them much space in his brain, not since the coup. They’d gone silent as he’d reached the bottom of the stairs and he hadn’t had the time, energy, or willpower to give them much mental space to make any sort of noise since. Where he’s boxed their memory up in his mind is a dull ache, a now-old wound that he refused to poke at unless he had to. Sometimes it hurt less, when he wandered too close to it; other times, it throbbed more than he could bear. Seeing Wilbur after so long had been a near-constant reminder of them. Being in the castle is like walking around with their ghosts at either shoulder. George wonders if he’s forever doomed to be haunted - first XD and now them.

This, he decides, is one of the times where opening that box is going to be too much to deal with. He's too lazy to handle any sort of emotional baggage regarding his parents so close to where he'd abandoned them to their royal fate; a fate he'd only barely escaped.

"I don't want to be here anymore," He stands, dusting off his knees and butt, "Too dusty. It's annoying."

Karl looks up at him, empty eyes more intense than even his usual gaze. Then he sighs and climbs to his feet.

"Okay, George," He says, "That's okay. Let's go."

The last thing George sees before he closes his door is Gavin the creeper, lent lovingly against the creaseless pillows, stitched up and only a bit wilted.

Dream had been right. There are two auxiliary kitchens still running and they're well-stocked. While Dream talks to the head chef, Sapnap disappears into the pantries to pick and choose what they'll be taking.

When they'd been younger, it had never been Sapnap or Dream's responsibility to pack rations. When George had to go somewhere, they'd sort of just shown up and the squires had taken care of the more minute details. Their job had been to protect George and keep him company, not to make sure that the food was up to his standards or that snacks were provided.

Dream had done it anyway, though. The night before journeys, Dream would sneak out of their barracks and go to the kitchen to make sure that the food being packed for their trip was at least appealing to George. Sapnap hadn't understood, at first. George isn't a picky eater; he would eat anything without complaint. The richest food at a banquet or an unseasoned fish on a spit generally garnered the same reaction from him - boredom, for the most part.

Sapnap had eventually realized, though, that George had favorites. He liked some foods more than others, just like anyone did, but he rarely voiced it. When they were younger, George had rarely voiced any opinions at all except those he was parroting from his parents, let alone what dessert he preferred. The food had just been something Dream had noticed, something he'd felt driven to influence. He'd always made sure George had snacks that he liked, that the food packed for the trips included at least something that he knew George enjoyed, even if it was only George's preferred tea.

George had never said thank you to Dream for the food, but he'd shared it between the three of them. Dream had never told George he got up in the early hours of the morning, snuck to the kitchens, and bargained for the best bits of George's favorites, but he'd done it. Small things like that were what helped Sapnap to realize that, sometimes, his friends just don't... say things. Sapnap is blunt, and kind of loud, and he likes when things are open and clear, all the facts on the table. Mincing words, hiding feelings - it rarely worked out for him. George and Dream are different, though. Half of what they mean is said without words, and Sapnap still struggles, sometimes, even with them, to hear what they aren't saying.

It's ironic, he knows, that he's fallen for two men who speak the same half-verbal language that his best friends do. Karl says so many words, but most of them are - fluff. Sapnap has to parse through what he has said to recognize what he isn't saying. And Quackity can be loud and playful and joking, but to admit aloud anything of value is still hard for him. Sapnap tries hard, for all four of them, to listen.

Right now, it feels like all four of them are screaming and Sapnap can't hear what they're saying and none of them will meet him in the middle. None of them will speak his language, so he's just - floundering. Standing in the pantry of a kitchen he'd sworn to himself to never see again, holding a slab of salted meat in one hand and a bag of apples in the other, Sapnap feels useless. He doesn't even know what would be best to pack for the Nether. Meat for protein? Carbs for energy? Dairy for fat content? Or are those things too heavy, in a place where they'll no doubt be sweating everything out within hours? Should they just focus on field rations and water?

Sapnap crouches in the pantry, picking through the crates of grain bags on the bottom shelves while he thinks.

"Sap?" Dream pokes his head into the pantry, "You good?"

"I don't know what to pack," he admits, poking at the grain bags. He feels like he's pouting but he just feels - overwhelmed, surrounded by all this food, with no idea what will be best.

"That's a good idea," Dream says, much to his surprise, "We should probably figure out how much and what we're taking. The chef's given us an open pick of the lot, so."

"They always did like you the most," Sapnap stands, brushing his knees off of dirt that isn't there.

"Because I'm *nice* to them," Dream reaches out to ruffle his hair, "Unlike some people."

"It was *one* food fight."

"You almost got lashed for that one food fight. You're lucky George threw such a royal fit."

"Like he needed an excuse to be a diva." Sapnap rolls his eyes, but the memory makes him smile. It had been scary, at the time, with his parents away from the castle and George the only thing between a punishment like a lashing from a pissed off captain of the guard and him; George had come through, though, with the sort of tenacious defense of his knight that had led to weird rumors about the two of them for months. Looking back, Sapnap had probably deserved the lashing but his back appreciates the lack of scars.

"Let's plan for six months," Dream says thoughtfully, shaking Sapnap out of his reverie.

"Six months?" He repeats, confused.

"Yeah," Dream says, beginning to pull down more of the packages of salted beef, "Just in case. We can pack for six months. Dried oranges, or some kind of citrus, so we don't end up with scurvy. Fresh fruit won't last that long, but we can make sure to bring plenty of meat.

It's salty, so we'll have to drink a lot of water to make up for that. There aren't any lakes or springs in the Nether, so water will be an issue, but I learned an enchantment to make endless water in a cauldron from a book I found while I was there, so -"

"I don't think we'll be there for six months." Sapnap cuts the ramble off, accepting the packages of meat when Dream starts to stack them in his arms.

"It's just in case," Dream insists. "We have no idea how long we'll be there."

"How about we plan for a month?" Sapnap tries to bargain. "Less stuff to dig through in the enderchest."

Dream hesitates, looking unsure. "Six months is safer. Hunting isn't easy there."

"We aren't going to be trapped, Dream." Sapnap says carefully. "We'll only be there long enough to help Karl."

"That could take six months," Dream reasons.

"Karl wouldn't last six months, if we don't help him in time." Sapnap says, hoping that some blunt truth may help bring Dream back down. "Let's do one."

"I don't want any of us to go hungry," Dream holds tighter to the wrapped meat in his hands.

"Let's compromise," Sapnap offers, "Two months' worth. We need to leave room for other things. Even the enderchest can only hold so much."

"...fine," Dream gives in, reluctantly setting the package back into its place on the shelf. "Two months."

"I liked the fruit idea," Sapnap doesn't linger on the decision, turning around to look at their options. "If we bring the right spices and pack the veggies well, we can probably make stew for a solid few weeks, if we end up there for that long."

"There's no lack of fire for cooking," Dream agrees, and they spend the next half hour brainstorming rations and picking at the options until there's a hardy pile of salted meat, root vegetables, and dried and fresh fruit. Dream has it packed away into a crate and Sapnap gathers up the spices they thought up for stews, taking from the reserves with permission. He snags a sack of flour and another of sugar, some yeast, plenty of salt while he's in the spice pantry and returns to add his gains to the crate.

"Maybe we should have kept the enderchest," he says, hefting the crate on one end so Dream can carry the other.

"Let's just take it back to the guest quarters. We'll have to take a minute to pack the enderchest, anyway." Dream shrugs one shoulder lightly, and they don't have much choice so that's what they do.

The room is empty, much to Sapnap's concern, but he knows that Karl can take care of himself and is no doubt just working off some antsy energy so he lets it go. They leave the

crate on the floor by the bed and dust their hands.

“Armory?” Sapnap asks when Dream spends too long looking at his hands, expression growing steadily more somber.

“Huh?” Dream snaps his eyes up to Sapnap, nodding, “Yeah, um. Yes, armory. Let’s go.”

“Dream,” Sapnap starts, but Dream is out of the room before Sapnap even finishes saying his name and Sapnap has to jog to catch up. Dream’s legs are longer and he walks like he’s on a mission; Sapnap has to focus on not falling behind, prickles of irritation at both himself for being short and at Dream for making him think about it spurring him on.

The armory is located just next to the barracks. As they make their way out of the castle, crossing the courtyard, Sapnap catches sight of people peeking at them through the windows and around the corners; proof of life. The castle may not be in use much, but there are still servants around, still knights and squires, the occasional noble or counselor with their retinue. And all of them sneak glances at Dream and Sapnap as they speed-walk across well-worn stones.

There is a guard standing outside the armory, when it comes into view. Even from a distance, the antlers give him away.

“Calla?” Dream says under his breath in surprise, steps quickening even more, “Callahan!”

"Callahan?" Sapnap demands, starting to jog. "Holy shit, Callahan!"

Callahan, hearing his name, turns from where he'd been overlooking the opposite direction of the courtyard. Sapnap sees his dark eyes go wide, his mouth dropping open from shock.

Maybe word hadn't spread all over the castle just yet after all.

Callahan starts to wave his arms wildly, jumping in place. Relief sweeps through Sapnap, strong enough to almost have him stumbling.

Dream reaches him first, barrelling into the sort of bear hug that would have crushed a lesser person. Callahan just holds his ground, hugging Dream back tightly as he's nearly lifted off his feet. Sapnap reaches them just as Dream releases Callahan and Sapnap is pulled into his own tight embrace, Callahan laughing as they separate.

It's the first time Sapnap has really seen him in over two years. He'd had a glimpse of Callahan and Alyssa during the second coup, but they hadn't had any time at all to even greet each other. And then Sapnap had ditched with the others and that had been that.

Sapnap has missed him. If he's honest, he's missed all of their friends. They'd grown up together, trained by each other's sides almost their whole lives. The betrayal of the order had hurt Sapnap but, with time and distance and the knowledge that they'd all come together to help in the end, forgiveness hadn't been difficult. None of his bitterness remains as he looks at Callahan, only excitement at seeing his old friend.

You're back, Callahan signs, fingers blurring in his excitement.

"Sort of," Dream hedges, "Not for very long. We have to leave again."

So soon? Callahan frowns. *How long have you been back?*

"We only got in early this morning," Sapnap exchanges a glance with Dream, "And we leave this evening. We're actually here to get some supplies."

Have you seen the others yet? Callahan asks, his excitement fading to something sadder. *We've missed you.*

"No, we haven't." Dream's face drops. "We miss you guys, too. If we could stay..."

What time do you leave? Callahan hesitates, hands still before he continues, *Come to dinner?*

Sapnap wants to say yes. He wants to see everyone - clap Punz's shoulder, catch up with Sam and Alyssa, hear the stories Ponk has got up to, ask Niki about her baking. He wants to tell them all about Puffy, in the broad strokes, to let them know she isn't dead. Maybe introduce them to his fiances.

"George is going to meet with the envoy," Sapnap says quietly, in case unwanted ears are listening. "We're leaving right after."

"But," Dream hesitates, "Maybe...maybe after. When we're back, we can..."

Yes! Callahan signs, his fist tight as he bobs it, *Yes! I'll tell the others.*

"Thank you," Sapnap says with relief. "We need to get back to gathering supplies, but...fuck, man. It's so good to see you."

Callahan smiles again, though it's smaller - more nervous.

I never got to say sorry, he hesitates, hand movements small as he says, *To tell George I was sorry.*

"We know." Dream clasps his shoulder, "We know. We understand. It was...it was a bad situation, for everyone. George forgives you as much as we do. I promise."

Callahan grips Dream's wrist, squeezing as he looks between them carefully and then nods.

I'll keep everyone out until you're done. Callahan eventually signs, and Sapnap smacks him on the back hard enough for him to stumble, a real grin coming to his face. Sapnap hasn't felt like this in weeks and weeks, not since before they made the decision to leave the mansion. He's happy to see Callahan, even if he isn't happy to be back in the castle or in Kinoko. There's a bright side, standing right in front of him, to this trip, at least.

"Thanks, Calla," Dream says and then he and Sapnap leave their friend and head into the armory, letting the heavy door shut behind them.

The armory itself is a large room, split into two sections by a thin wall down the middle. The left portion houses armor and shields; different shades of leather, different materials for

mending and darning, extra smocks and uniforms. The right side houses weaponry; an assortment of training tools for squires and for sparring, replacement weapons in the worst case scenario that a knight's tools are permanently destroyed or lost. Along both sides of the dividing wall are swords of all shapes and sizes and levels of sharpness.

Sapnap had spent what he was sure was at least a full year's worth of time in this building, sharpening swords and buffing armor, mending chainmail and hammering out shield dents.

It smells the same; that's the first thing he thinks as he looks around. Like light mineral oil and something just...distinctly *home*-like.

"We need something more durable than leather. I'm thinking iron or diamond, but we need to take gold armor, too. Piglins like gold and we'll be safer if we're wearing it."

"Does it need to be a lot of gold?" Sapnap frowns thoughtfully, moving to the left to take a look at their options. Iron armor for all five of them wouldn't be helpful; Karl and Quackity aren't used to it and it would probably cause them more problems than the protection is worth. George, by all rights, *should* have been used to it but he'd always stripped his armor off as soon as he could, even when in the middle of a spar. Leather would be better for the three of them, but more sturdy material would work best for him and Dream.

"Do you think they'd let us get away with two of the diamond sets?"

"That's pretty expensive," Dream joins him, "I wonder if they confiscated our sets from our room."

"Probably," Sapnap scoffs, "I can't imagine Schlatt letting it just sit there."

"Well, then," Dream smiles, "*Technically*, two of these are ours, aren't they?"

"I like the way you think." Sapnap finds himself grinning back. It's like a spark between them, almost stinging with the intensity. It feels right. It feels like what it's *supposed* to feel like between them. The unease and uncertainty, the feeling that Sapnap has to tread cautiously, the knowledge that Dream is hiding things from him - none of that is natural. None of that is what it's *supposed* to be like between them. It's supposed to be like this; easy, understanding, sure.

Dream must feel it too because Sapnap notices the way his eyes soften, a familiar green that Sapnap feels like he hasn't seen in weeks because Dream keeps avoiding his eyes.

How right it feels puts into stark comparison that it's been so *wrong* lately.

Dream breaks eye contact, looking back at the diamond under his touch.

"We need to measure ourselves," He says, clearing his throat. "Make sure we grab the right sizes."

"I'll find some measuring tape." Sapnap says quietly, heart sinking. Dream doesn't stop him as he walks away.

Sapnap finds the tape where it's always been stored, much to his relief. He has a feeling his own body has changed, though he's not sure if it's changed the armor size he needs, so measuring is a good call. He just wishes Dream hadn't used it as an excuse to put space between them.

"We should pick weapons out for Karl and Quackity," Dream suggests, and it feels like an apology and an offer of peace in one.

"Sure." Sapnap agrees quietly, not looking at Dream as he pulls the tape along his arm to get an idea of length. He hears shuffling behind him but lets it pass, focusing on taking his measurements. He doesn't remember exactly what his numbers were the last time he was fitted but he has a feeling that his biceps have shrunk a bit, that his waist has narrowed. He hasn't completely recovered from his sickness last year, and the weeks on a boat with not much room to train haven't helped. He wants to keep bulking up until he's back in prime shape. When they get home, he'll prioritize it.

"It won't be accurate if you do it," Dream says when Sapnap starts trying to measure his shoulders, "I can help."

"It's fine," Sapnap mutters, trying to straighten his shoulders and pinching two sides to either one. He can't see the number, though, or really tell if he's gone quite far enough, or even too far.

"Just let me help," Dream huffs, coming into view on Sapnap's left, reaching down to take up the dangling end of the tape.

"I don't need help," Sapnap tugs at the tape, "I can do it on my own."

Dream tugs back. "Don't be an idiot."

"*You're* being an idiot," Sapnap tugs again, harder, but Dream doesn't let go of the tape.

"No, *you're* being an idiot," Dream doubles down, pulling, and Sapnap almost loses his hold on the tape until he clenches his hand down around it.

"No, I'm the only one *not* being an idiot lately." Sapnap glares, turning to face Dream more fully. "Between you and Karl and George, I don't know who the biggest idiot is but you three are just passing the crown around lately."

Dream winces.

"I'm not that bad." He tries to defend himself, but his voice is weak. He knows as well as Sapnap does.

"You are." Sapnap drops the tape and crosses his arms. "You're hiding shit and you won't talk to George or me about anything. Not *really*. Things have been weird ever since we got to Pandora. You wouldn't tell me about what Puffy said during the fight, you wouldn't talk about anything at all in front of Patches, you won't look at me at all. I *know* it's not me, which means that it's *you*. So *you're* being an idiot."

“It’s not...” Dream huffs. “It’s not important. It’s stupid.”

“So tell me, then, if it’s not important.” Sapnap snaps. “Why can’t we talk about it? Do you not trust me with it? Do you think I can’t handle it?”

“*No!* Sap, that’s not -” Dream bites his lip, eyes dropping, “No. Nothing like that. I just... ugh,”

Dream turns away from him, going to plop onto one of the chairs that the squires use while mending. Sapnap, unsure, follows, not dropping his glare.

“It’s just...feelings.” Dream says when he’s sitting, hands clasped on the table, eyes downcast.

“Okay?” Sapnap joins him at the table, sitting across from him. “Do we not talk about feelings now?”

“I get it, I get it,” Dream bites his lip, obvious upset on his face. Sapnap is relieved that Dream at least is ready to show *something* besides that blank expression he’s been putting on like he’s immulating XD’s mask lately.

“If you get it, then just...say it, dude. Tell me what’s wrong so we can figure it out. I don’t like this...space,” Sapnap motions between them. “It’s disconcerting and shit, man. It’s like you’re not even there.”

“I’m always here,” Dream says, head snapping up, “No matter what, I’m always here.”

“Well, I am, too,” Sapnap shifts awkwardly. “I know you aren’t...used to it. Leaning on me for serious stuff. I know I fucked up with my flame. But things are different now. I’m not a stupid teenager anymore, and I learned my lesson about hiding things. I can handle it if you need help.”

“Shut up,” Dream frowns, “What are you even talking about? I’ve always been able to lean on you. You’ve never let me down. I...I know I can go to you for help. I just wish I didn’t have to. I wish I could be the steady one again. I wish you guys could depend on me without having to worry.”

“Honestly, dude, I’m pretty sure I’ve developed an anxiety disorder,” Sapnap says, only half-joking. “I worry about everyone constantly. You aren’t an exception just because you can fight.”

Dream huffs again, but it’s a laugh this time.

“That’s not good, Sap.”

“You *are* the steady one.” Sapnap says, refusing to be distracted or taken into a conversation about himself. This is about Dream, he’s going to keep it about Dream while he still has Dream willing to talk.

“I’m not, lately.” Dream drops the smile, fingers weaving together.

“You are.” Sapnap says firmly. “You’re our rock. I know that you’ll always come through for us. There’s not even a doubt, fuckhead. Is that what’s been bothering you?”

“It’s hard to explain. There’s a lot.”

Sapnap looks around obviously. “There’s not gonna be a better time than this.”

Dream’s lips twitch up, and he nods, the pads of his thumbs pressing together.

“I thought I was okay,” Dream says after almost a full minute of silence. “With Puffy.”

Sapnap nods, hoping Dream will continue. He does.

“I thought I’d...accepted it. I thought I’d, I dunno. Worked through it. The anger. The disappointment. The guilt.”

“But then you saw her.”

“Then I saw her.” Dream agrees, voice soft and sad. “And she’s happy. She has a ship and a crew and a first mate and the sea. She didn’t...miss me. Or regret it, what she did. She acted like we’d just...I dunno. Lost each other in a crowd. We didn’t, though. She left me.”

Sapnap nods, trying to stay silent. He has nothing nice to say about Puffy, but this isn’t the time or place for his own feelings on her.

“I think I hate her, a bit,” Dream admits, like he’s confessing a sin. “But I love her, too. And, before we left, I said some...some really mean shit to her. When we were alone.”

“Like what?”

“Just...all of the things I’d been keeping in, because I knew that a lot of it wasn’t right, but it just...I don’t know if a lot of it was *wrong*, either. I thought we’d have...time, maybe. On the way to Kinoko. If she really wanted to prove me wrong, she’d have the time to do it. But...”

“But we got taken directly to Kinoko.” Sapnap fills in the space and Dream nods, shoulders hunching.

“I don’t regret it.” Dream says and Sapnap believes the conviction in his voice. “Karl needed it. I don’t regret it. But I just...feel...bad.”

Sapnap looks at him; his best friend, making himself small, wracked with guilt. He’s been wanting to find Puffy since he was only a child, since the second he’d read the first word of her letter. Sapnap knows how important finding her had been for Dream - in a less time-sensitive situation, Sapnap thinks that things may have turned out differently. Been a bit less fraught.

Dream had sacrificed that slow, careful re-discovery of his not-mom in order to make sure Karl was safe.

Sapnap wants to say *thank you*. Instead, he reaches out and grips the back of Dream's hand, squeezing tightly. Dream glances up at him, turns his hand and grips Sapnap's hand back.

"Maybe, after, I could try to talk to her again," Dream hesitates. "But what if she doesn't want to? The things I said to her were..."

"If she's worth anything at all," Sapnap says firmly, "then she'll want to. You're her son."

"Am I?" Dream asks, looking at their hands. "I thought I was. But parents shouldn't...they shouldn't leave their kids like that. Yours didn't. George's didn't. Why did mine?"

"Sometimes, they do," Sapnap says, words careful. This is a territory he's never been in before; a place he's never been able to meet Dream in. He has his parents. He has both of them, and they love him and never hesitate to show and tell him that. The longest he'd ever gone without talking to one of them was during their flight from Schlatt's coup, and he'd still exchanged letters regularly with his dad. He can't imagine what Dream had gone through.

Dream sighs, nodding. "Yeah. I kind of talked to Quackity about it, a little. And Karl, kind of. It helped, a bit, but it's still different, I think. Quackity says his family didn't want to leave. Karl says he doesn't care about whatever happened to his. Why am I stuck somewhere in the middle?"

He laughs, pulls his hands away to rub his face. "God, I sound like a fucking fourteen year old."

"Because you were *hurt* as a fourteen year old, Dream," Sapnap snaps. "You're allowed."

"It's so selfish," Dream shakes his head, putting his elbows on the table and his face in his hands. "They didn't even get to know what happened to their parents. George's are *dead* and he heard it happen. I bet all three of them would give up anything to just...talk to theirs, at least one more time. And I had her, right there," Dream motions into space, "I *had* her. And I told her to fuck off, essentially."

Sapnap opens his mouth to say *something*, but he doesn't know what. Dream keeps going, working himself into a rant.

"Puffy didn't leave because she hated me. She had her reasons and they were more important than me. But I hate them and I was mad at her, and I just let that get the better of me and I said awful shit to her, because I say stupid, mean shit when I'm mad. I made her cry, and then I just...disappeared. I did to her exactly what she did to me, and that's fucking...awful. I could have just talked to her, and worked it out, and appreciated the chance fate gave me to maybe build a relationship again. One that the others won't ever get the chance to do. And I just...threw it away. Like I did with her letters, I just ripped it up and tossed it into the wind."

"None of them blame you for that," Sapnap reminds him, hoping that his words bring some sort of comfort. "You have to know none of them begrudge you this. George would have probably fought her himself, if you'd said it was okay."

"I feel," Dream breathes in sharply, the fingers of one hand curling into his pale hair, "so guilty. Like I'm failing. Her and you guys and myself. I feel guilty that I was so relieved when I saw Bad and Skeppy, but all I could think of when I saw Puffy was that I wish she'd just thrown me into an orphanage once she found me instead of letting me love her before she left so I wouldn't have to feel like this."

Not knowing what else to do, Sapnap leaves his seat and takes the one next to Dream, instead. He clasps Dream's shoulder and Dream huffs again, sounding painfully close to a sob.

"Whatever you're feeling," Sapnap says, at least knowing the truth in this, "We're going to be here while you're feeling it. You can talk about this stuff with us. You've *never* failed us, Dream."

"I'm failing you right now," Dream swallows thickly. "We're preparing to go into the Nether. I promised myself that you and George would never have to see that place or live through it."

"I appreciate that," Sapnap gently shakes Dream's shoulder, "but I'm choosing to go to the Nether. It isn't up to you whether or not we go."

"I know." Dream tilts his face so he can see Sapnap; he's not crying but his eyes are a bit red and the misery hanging overhead is so obvious it leaves Sapnap a bit despondent. "I just wish I could protect you from it."

"I know," Sapnap shrugs. The words make him warm. "But you aren't failing us just because we have to go. *I* just wish that you'd stop...taking all of the responsibility onto yourself. We're a team, Dream. You don't have to be the strong leader all the time."

Dream blinks at him, eyes thoughtful. Sapnap meets his gaze head-on, confident in this, if in nothing else.

"Wow," Dream eventually says softly. "Sometimes, it hits me how much you've changed, Pandas."

Sapnap winces and Dream hurries to keep going, assuring as he says, "It's not bad. It's... different, but it's not bad. It just feels, sometimes, like you're all grown up."

"I am," Sapnap scoffs, sitting back in his chair. "I'm only a year younger than you, asshole."

"Well, yeah, but," Dream shrugs, "You know."

"...yeah," Sapnap admits. "I know. You guys spoiled me."

"We still spoil you."

"Yeah," Sapnap is man enough to admit that, too, "But I know it now, how much you and George watched out for me. It wasn't just helping me with laundry, was it? It was...you being our leader, and making decisions so I didn't have to. It was George never complaining about the important things, letting me get away with all sorts of shit even when someone else would

have been punished for it. I know how much you guys did that, now. It was a painful wake up call, but I had it when you were gone.”

“I wish you hadn’t.” Dream makes an admission of his own. “I hate it, sometimes, that you had to have it. I want to keep doing it. Being the leader, making the right decisions. I hate that I’m different, too. I don’t feel like *me*, sometimes.”

Sapnap can relate to that. He’d hated it, becoming who he is now. Every step had been an agony, wracked with guilt and anger and uncertainty. He’d been scared of this new person he was growing into - less trusting, more bitter, the idea of happiness and fun and joy so stripped from him in the wake of the heaviest loss of his entire life.

He’s found that trust, that happiness, that fun, that joy again. He’s not who he was, and he never will be again - but he’s okay with who he is now, too. He’s still learning to accept the loss as irreversible, but he’s okay with the result.

Sapnap thinks Dream may still be working on it, too. He’s different than he was before, too, though Sapnap loves him just the same. Dream is quieter now. He’s always been level-headed, but his temper used to be like TNT, back in the day, when it had finally been triggered. Sapnap hasn’t seen that temper in a long time. He shrinks when he’s mad, he doesn’t explode. Dream questions himself more. He’s introspective in a way that feels dangerous, sometimes, as if he’s going to get trapped in his own mind if one of them can’t pull him out. Sometimes, he gets...lost, if they don’t notice it, and it takes a long, long time for Dream to come back.

Dream’s fucking traumatized, the Nether has caused the same irreversible change in him that Dream’s disappearance had caused in Sapnap, and Sapnap hates that. *Hates* it. But he still loves him, and he still respects the man he is, the *leader* he is, and would follow him to the end of the world without an ounce of hesitation, no questions asked. Well. He’d ask a few questions, probably, but it would be while on the move, at least.

“You will.” he says. “I know it’s not easy, but I promise I can handle it, if you need help sometimes. I’m ready. You don’t have to rip yourself apart trying to protect us. Let us protect you.”

“I don’t doubt your ability to handle anything that comes your way, Sap.” Dream puts his hand over Sapnap’s on his shoulder, obviously taking comfort in the touch.

“Good, because I’m awesome.” Sapnap smirks, “You’re so lucky I’m around, dude.”

Dream laughs, real and loud, sitting up straight and blinking the wetness from his eyes. “Whatever, idiot.”

“But, hey,” Sapnap tries to let the sincerity in his voice speak for itself. “I mean it. Relax a little.”

“I’ll try.” Dream agrees, his shoulders stooping as if even his body is giving in to the words.

"And look on the bright side," Sapnap collects the measuring tape that Dream had left on the table and pulls at one of Dream's arms so he can start measuring him. "The next few hours should be the best hours ever. George is king. We can do whatever we want. We're, like...co-kings, basically."

"I'd rather lose toes than be any sort of king," Dream scoffs, standing up so Sapnap can measure his height out, too.

He's grown taller since their last fitting, the bitch.

"You don't want to wield your authority like an iron fist?" Sapnap jokes, stretching the tape across Dream's shoulders, "You got taller, but you're about the same crosswise. Your old size should still work."

"No, thanks." Dream rolls his eyes, "We can't even use our authority to make them leave us alone." As he speaks, he takes the tape and pats Sapnap's arms down at his sides so he can take a measure of his shoulders.

"Should we keep these measurements?" He asks, "You're gonna have to get measured again soon, maybe it'll save you some time."

"Why am I getting measured again?" Sapnap asks, confused, as he holds out his arm for Dream to wrap the tape around his bicep.

"For a suit," Dream snorts and Sapnap blinks at him until it hits and his face goes pink.

"Fuck, I do, don't I? Not anytime *soon*, though. These'll be useless by then, I want to get ripped again."

"Not soon?" Dream laughs, setting the tape aside, "You'll want to try on a new plate, I think. Your shoulders aren't as broad. I think if you keep Karl waiting much longer, he's just going to marry himself."

"Well, we'd be able to move it along if *you* two would," Sapnap reminds him, "You're the holdup here."

"What are we, some sort of noble family?" Dream pokes Sapnap's forehead, eyes bright with amusement, "You don't have to wait for us. George and I aren't getting married right now."

"Yes, *idiot*, we are a noble fucking family," Sapnap flusters, swatting at his hand and then turning on his heels to look at the sets of diamond armor currently on stands. There aren't many, especially not compared to the piles of differently-sized iron and leather pieces. Hopefully, one will fit, even if it's not perfectly like his last set did.

"Are you for real?" Dream pokes at him, metaphorically this time, as he joins him at the armor. He goes for a slightly bigger set than Sapnap could wear, and Sapnap eyes two different chest plates, not sure which to try first.

"About what?"

“About not getting married until George and I do.”

“That’s how it works, dick, stop making fun of me!”

“I’m not!” Dream lies, like a *liar*, still giggling to himself like a *bitch*, “But *why*?”

“I’m the youngest?” Sapnap says, because it’s obvious.

“So? We’re basically married already.”

“Okay, then go have him declare you married so I can get a move on before my fiance skins me. This is your fault.”

“It’s not,” Dream turns to him, chestplate in his hands. “Help me?”

Sapnap nods sulkily and helps Dream slip the chestplate over his head. He goes around tightening the straps, both of them testing the fit after each strap.

“It is.” Sapnap mutters, “You’re both older. I’m the youngest. It’s not...right, I guess. I know I don’t go for respect much, but it’d be fucked up for me to get married before you guys. You’ve been ready to tie the knot since you were twelve. I still remember all of the plans. We talked about them enough. It fits.”

“Yeah,” Dream agrees, twisting carefully to check the fit one last time, “I’ll help you, did you decide which one you think’ll work?”

Sapnap nods, pointing, and they work together to get it over his head. Dream tightens the straps while the familiar weight of heavy armor settles over him. He carefully flexes and knows it’s too small before Dream is even halfway done. It fits well, which means it won’t fit at all on top of the mail and gambeson.

“We need the other one,” he sighs, starting to unbuckle the straps and Dream doesn’t argue. They get the chestplate back into place and grab the next one, which works better.

Dream helps tighten the straps and Sapnap tests his flexibility, flexing again and finding the fit much better.

“You know,” Dream says, when they’ve both stripped out of the chestplates and put them on the table for later use, “George and I are happy for you. We’re excited for the wedding, whenever it is.”

“I know.” Sapnap says without looking at him. He has a feeling that if he looks at Dream while they talk about this, and apparently they’re going to talk about this, he’ll embarrass himself. Instead, he starts picking through the diamond leg braces until he finds ones he thinks will work and sits down to try them on.

“We aren’t going to get married for a while,” Dream admits, working on finding arm braces. “We talked about it and it’s just...it doesn’t feel right for us, right now. But it wouldn’t be disrespectful for you to go first. Lead the charge.”

“Maybe,” Sapnap says, unconvinced.

Dream chuckles, well-familiar with Sapnap’s stubbornness.

“Maybe it’d be cool,” Dream theorizes, “You taking a step into a new life-stage before us. We can join you after you have your footing and you can help us learn married life.”

Sapnap over-tightens the brace he’s strapping on and grunts, quickly loosening it. The words had sent a shock of panic through him strongly enough that he’d lost control of his movements for a second.

“I think I’ve had enough of being separated for now.” He says quietly, not wanting to bring the mood down but also wanting to be the same sort of honest with Dream that Dream had been with him. “I don’t want to go anywhere without you two.”

“Who said anything about being without us?” Dream drops next to him, two sets of arm braces in his hands, which he sets on the ground so he can start looking through the leg braces, too. “We’ll be right there the entire time, Sap. We’re your best men.”

“I haven’t asked you to be!”

“Not yet,” Dream says, because he knows Sapnap better than Sapnap knows himself, most of the time.

“Not yet,” Sapnap agrees begrudgingly.

“We live together.” Dream continues, strapping one brace down and then discarding it. “We do everything together. Being married won’t change any of that.”

“Maybe,” Sapnap hedges. “But what if it does?”

Sapnap has never been jealous of Dream and George’s romance. He’s been their biggest supporter since day one, even. But marriage...it’s a line, isn’t it? A category of relationship that will put a firm line between them. When Dream and George get married, it will become ‘Dream and George, and their friend Sapnap.’ When Sapnap marries Karl and Quackity, won’t it put a divide between him and his closest friends? Will he be able to be with them like he always has before, when he’s a husband and has responsibilities and duties to Karl and Quackity?

Sapnap wants to be as good to them as his own parents are to each other. But he has Dream and George, where Bad and Skeppy have never had anyone else that is just as important to them as each other. Sapnap can’t imagine a life without all four of them. Most of him *is* excited to get married; he wants it as badly as Karl and Quackity do. But there’s parts of him that dread it, and dread the loss of his current relationship with George and Dream when it happens.

At least if Dream and George are married, too, it won’t be such a painful change.

They finish fitting their armor in silence, and then take a minute to pick out gambeson from the wrack.

“The best part about not being in this castle,” Dream breaks the comfortable silence, when they’ve finished collecting their armor and have picked out leather pieces for the others, all of it piled on the table while they collect arrows for George and pick through available weaponry for Karl and Quackity, “is, for me, that we get to decide so much on our own.”

“Like what?”

“Like marriage.” Dream says, cutting to the chase. “If we decide that it’s not going to change anything between any of us, then it won’t. Just because you’re married to Karl and Quackity doesn’t mean you’re not still my soulmate, Sapnap. You and me and George. I think they know that. And we know how important they are to you. They’re important to us, too, and I think we’re important to them. The five of us are a package deal, no matter who is going to end up married to who. That’s what I think, at least.”

“...Maybe.” Sapnap says, but he means it this time. Dream reaches out, ruffles his hair. It’s almost a trained response for tears to fill his eyes when Dream does that.

“Don’t stress about it.” Dream says. “When you want to get married, they’ll be there for you, and so will we. Don’t let us not getting married hold you back, but don’t think you’re ever going to get rid of us, either.”

Sapnap slaps Dream’s hand away before he does actually start crying.

“You’re so fucking...” he searches desperately for a word, “stupid.”

“Okay,” Dream scoffs, “Sure, I’m the stupid one. Does Karl want a staff or a glaive?”

“Staff.” Sapnap grumbles, “And maybe an axe for Q.”

Dream hums in agreement.

They finish their search of the armory in that same comfortable silence. Sapnap isn’t sure if anything was actually solved in those talks, but he feels...better. He feels sure that, even if nothing was solved, he and Dream are back on the same page. That’s all he needs, more than anything else.

“Seriously,” George says, for what has to be the hundredth time, “You don’t have to come in with me.”

“I’m not letting you face the hounds alone,” Dream replies, “And we agreed it was best if Karl didn’t come in, and Sapnap isn’t letting either him or Quackity out of his sight while we’re all stuck in this meeting, so you’ve got me.”

“Not that I’ll ever complain about *that*,” George says, “But you hate this political bullshit just as much as I do. You’re not my knight anymore, you don’t have to deal with this.”

"Listen here," Dream stops and George stops with him, the evening light casting him in shadows as they walk the path to the courthouse, "I'm always going to be your knight. It's my right to go with you. Besides, hate it or not, we won't have to deal with it again after this."

"I really hope so." George scowls, "I can't persuade you to just let me do this on my own? Save yourself a horrible experience?"

"Never." Dream grins, offering a hand. "Now, allow me to escort you, Your Majesty. Let's get this over with."

George rolls his eyes, but he accepts Dream's hand.

"You're lucky you're cute or I'd have you executed for that sass." He says and Dream smiles crookedly at him. Wearing his diamond armor, hair freshly cleaned after a thorough bath, George is viscerally reminded that he has the most handsome boy in the kingdom at his side. It's so annoying that Dream just *looks* like this all the time. Ugh.

"Yes, George," Dream bows, holding the back of George's hand to the cool diamond of his chestplate, right above his heart.

"I wish you'd get a life," George says without thought, flustered, and he immediately regrets it. Dream laughs, though, loud and unfettered. When he starts walking again, George follows, their hands clasped tightly despite the eyes that spot them.

The front of the courthouse looks different from the last time George saw it. It lacks the entire population of the Kinoko capital, for one. It's empty, except for two knights George doesn't recognize guarding the double doors. Dream releases his hand as they approach and George resists the urge to grab it back.

"Your Majesty," one knight says, bowing low. The other one bows, too, but stays silent.

George nods, letting the address pass without comment. He doesn't want to put them in an uncomfortable position.

The doors open without much fanfare. The courthouse is, as it tends to be when council is in session, full of people, and they all turn to stare when George walks in, Dream a step behind him. Their usual bickering had not, unfortunately, made them late to the proceedings, but they aren't particularly early either.

Much to George's chagrin, this means that they will have to be engaged in what George considers to be one of the worst parts of politics; small talk.

On the slightly smaller, and distant, brightside, the Hermits were never ones to be particularly boring, unlike a number of the Kinoko council members.

There are three of them, in total, and true to their nature as tinkerers and builders, none of them look particularly up for a fight. George remembers a meeting he was dragged to as a teen involving some anarchistic states that looked like they were always about a minute away from punching him in the face. Thankfully, weapons are minimal on the three in front of him, but that doesn't make them any less impressive.

The first that catches his eye is the colorful and expansive wings of their avian; even tucked into his back, they're still huge, comparable to Philza's in size. Parrot wings, if George had to

guess, in shades of dark gray and blue compared to a bright yellow at the tips which reminds him of Quackity. They are, George notes with a pang in his heart, unmarred and beautiful.

The second man looks like the very pinnacle of what he would expect a Hermit to be. The wheelchair he sits in is extravagantly practical; George is sure that it's got far more functions than simply helping him get around. The redstone gleams against the copper, steam hissing every so often out from the contraptions on the back of the chair. At his side, Dream suddenly stiffens, and George feels his heart jump, prepared for something dangerous - before he notices the gray and white cat snoozing in a basket hanging off the wheelchair. His fondness for Dream nearly threatens to overwhelm him, even there in the middle of a council.

The third and final man doesn't appear to be more than typically human, the most formally dressed and perhaps the least ostentatious of the trio. By the way he shuffles the papers in front of him and his position between them both, he appears to be the leader. From his lessons, George vaguely recalls that Hermit leaders were chosen through diplomacy, but were put up for leadership by their peers in the first place for their technological skills and their general popularity; though for Hermits, that tends to mean affability rather than any kind of might or prowess, as it might do in other places. If there's one thing that appears to describe this man better than any other, it's most certainly affable. If anything, it's the avian that George will have to watch out for, eyes sharper than a hawk that haven't left him since he first entered the room.

"They actually found you," The avian says, eyebrow raising, "I was beginning to believe that the King was a myth." George follows his gaze as he looks him up and down, head tilting, "He certainly looks like the son of the Queen, so I don't think it's an actor, Mumbo."

"Grian!" The middle of the men, supposedly Mumbo, sounds outraged as he shushes him, "Shh!"

"Oh, like we weren't all thinking it when it's taken them months to produce their monarch." Grian waves it away, "No offence meant, Your Majesty."

"George," He replies, strained, "Please. No titles are necessary here."

He thinks if people keep calling him that, while they talk about how much like his mother he looks, he may not make it to the end of this. His promised twelve hours will expire in a hundred and twenty more minutes, but those minutes seem like eternities in and of themselves.

Grian raises his eyebrows again. George thinks it may be approving this time.

"Please accept our late welcome to Kinoko," Dream sweeps in, as the silence stretches on a bit too long, "We're sorry we weren't able to offer one sooner."

"Oh geez, we *did* pull you away from your mourning, didn't we...Honestly, we thought your council here was making you up!" The gentleman in the chair speaks up, and George takes a moment as the huge, deep gray top hat takes up all of his vision until he can focus on his face. It reminds him of Karl's cloak, and thinking of Karl makes him think of all the time they're wasting right now, and he hurries to answer.

“No,” George assures, “I’m very real. I was called for the good of Kinoko, and so I’m back to help settle this dispute. We’ll be leaving again, as soon as we’ve sorted this out.” He hopes that doesn’t entirely come off as dismissive, though it really is.

“His Majesty wants this to succeed just as much as all of you do.” Dream tacks on helpfully. George is grateful and hopes that, between the two of them, he doesn’t somehow lose Kinoko the entire deal all together.

“Great!” The man in the hat replies, “Should I go ahead and introduce myself, seeing as these two didn’t bother to introduce us properly?”

Grian swats him in the back of the head with a wing.

“You -! You dislodged my hat!”

“I barely *touched* it, don’t get your knickers in a twist -”

Mumbo just sighs, clearly longsuffering. “Both of you, *behave*.”

He holds out a hand towards George, “I’m Mumbo, current CEO of Boatem, Incorporated. This one here is Grian, he’s in charge of our trade and commerce, and this is Scar, head of construction. It’s good to meet you.”

George doesn’t know what to do with the casualness of the addresses, but he does, at least, know to take Mumbo’s hand and shake it firmly. “Good to meet you, too.”

“Between you and me,” Grian says, leaning forward with a grin that doesn’t match his sharp eyes, though George is beginning to think that that may just be an avian trait and not a sign of distrust, “I hate meetings. We normally make them a bit more fun over at Boatem.”

“How do you make meetings fun?” Dream asks politely.

Grian’s smile turns sharp, “Oh, you know.” He says, “The void.”

And with that horrifying proclamation, he leans back a little, allowing himself to pet the cat in the back of Scar’s chair. Perhaps the eyes are not an avian trait, then.

“It’s not dangerous as long as you feed it,” He shrugs, “Just like most things.”

“I...see.” George starts, wracking his brain for distant lessons in geography and small talk, “I know the Hermits are famed for their builds. I haven’t had the privilege of seeing any for myself.”

“Not many people have,” Mumbo replies.

“I was told of one, last time I had occasion to hear of Hermit exploits,” George says, carefully. “Was it a shopping district?”

“Oh, that was ages ago!” Mumbo laughs, thankfully unbothered by his out of date knowledge, “Scar was in charge, then.”

“And I was a great mayor, thank you very much!”

“Hmm,” Grian says, “Not enough mycelium.”

“Disgusting block, I don’t know what you’re talking about -”

“Guys, please,” Mumbo says, fingers pinching the bridge of his nose, “Not in front of royalty,”

“It’s alright,” George laughs politely, and motions in Dream’s direction, “He argues much worse in front of me.”

“Oh, dude, tell me about it,” Mumbo says, rolling his eyes, and continues while George exchanges a confused glance with Dream over being called *dude* during a political meeting, “Grian likes to start wars like most people like a good cup of tea.”

“In my *defense*,” Grian says, when both George and Dream startle at the words, “They’ve all been rather friendly. As wars go. Plus, they’re a good inspiration for builds.”

“Oh, builds! That’s what you were asking about, right?” Scar says, perking up a bit when George nods, “Well, we just broke through to an excellent copper mine, so we’ve been incorporating that into our builds a lot; got a great industry of waxers already up and running, which is faaantastic.” He draws out the word, grinning, “The thing about building is about the combinations, right? So it’s about finding good things to combine with the copper. Acacia is an excellent wood to combine with the raw copper, but when it’s oxidized, we haven’t found anything yet that quite fits with the color. It’s a light blue, you see? We have our best builders on the case. I think Pearl had a couple of promising experiments with dyes and wool... but it’s not as strong as wood, obviously.”

“Scar,” Grian says, fond, “I think you’re overwhelming the king.”

Head still spinning from the information overload, George says, faintly, “You’re fine. And, please, no need for formalities.”

They look at him curiously but before they can say anything, the last few people slip into the room. One of them is Bad, who looks around the room with a casual concern that only abates when he sees George and Dream. He comes to them, nodding politely to the Hermits.

“Hello, Ambassador,” Mumbo says, the first sign of tension appearing. Bad smiles back, polite but strained.

“Mister Mayor,” Bad greets, looking between George and Mumbo, “I see you’ve met His Majesty.”

“Polite young man,” Mumbo says approvingly, though he doesn’t look much older, if he even is, than George at all.

Bad nods, a real smile sliding over his face as he looks at George. “He is. Thank you for making an appearance, George.”

“Anything for Kinoko.” George says hollowly and he sees the hidden flinch in Bad’s eyes that most others would not.

Bad squeezes his shoulder encouragingly. “Are you ready to begin?”

“As I’ll ever be.” George looks at Dream, who nods almost imperceptibly, and Bad leads him away from the Hermits and to the floor. There, in the front of the courthouse, is not quite a throne, but a seat of honor, nonetheless. It is here that George’s mother and father had both presided over debates and meetings. It’s this chair that George sits now, Dream standing at attention by his side, his face a mask of seriousness as he attends the duty of the First Knight of Kinoko.

Bad takes his seat to George’s left, separated but close enough to be called if needed, and leans forward, clapping his hands together.

“Attention, all council members! Please take your seats!”

There is a general shuffling as murmurs trail off and the members of the council take their seats until everyone is in place. Only then does Bad continue.

“To begin, all please welcome His Majesty. King George has returned to us from his Mourning Retreat to help us reach a consensus on the issues being discussed with the respected Boatem representatives.”

George watches passively as every council member stands from their seats and bow to him. A chorus of “Long may he reign!” rings across the room. He feels ill. Next to him, Dream does not move, nor look at him, and George is grateful for it.

The council, as one, return to their seats and Bad clears his throat.

There are far too many eyes on him, but George is at least glad that Bad appears to have briefed the other council members on his return. He doesn’t think he could deal with even more questions, even with Dream at his side.

“I apologize for my absence.” He lies. “Thank you for your service to the people of our great nation. Though I do not doubt that each of you has nothing but the best intentions when it comes to making decisions regarding our laws in my absence, I hope that my presence can ease any feelings of unease harbored by our guests while working with Kinoko.”

“No unease, Your Majesty,” Mumbo speaks. “We’re an easygoing people, us Hermits. But we have rules, you understand.”

“I do.” George nods, forcing a smile. “Bad, please continue.”

“The Council of Leadership is now in session,” Bad calls out, voice ringing, “First order of business. We’ll be revisiting the contract between the Hermit city of Boatem and Kinoko Kingdom, which was written and signed twenty-two years ago by an envoy of Boatem representatives and the late Queen Loraine.”

Each of the council members nod solemnly, as if over half of them hadn't known about the coup and perhaps participated in it.

"Are we amenable to continuing?" Bad asks on ceremony, "Say aye."

Another chorus goes up as most council members say *aye*, even the Boatem envoy joining in.

"Commencing," Bad sits back. "We'll revisit the beginning of our re-negotiation efforts for the King's benefit. Kinoko deeply values and respects the Boatem people and our relationship. In the twenty-two years since this deal's signing, neither party has ever reneged on our agreement. Unfortunately, two years ago, Kinoko was attacked from within, and considerable damage was done to our nation. For this reason, we must ask Boatem to accept a renegotiation of the price stated in this agreement."

"The redstone from our mines is the finest in the world," Mambo starts, "As well as the contraptions and components we use to refine it. Boatem feels for your plight, the transfer of power is bumpy at times and we're glad that Kinoko has found peace within its borders again, but that price is fair for what you're asking from us."

George frowns. "Surely some of our exported goods can replace gold in the contract."

"Diamonds," Bad corrects, quickly.

"Diamonds," George says, "Right. I knew that."

He tries not to meet any of the Hermit's eyes, all of which have taken on various, searching looks. He doesn't know if he wants them to understand that he only walked into this a few hours ago, or if he doesn't.

"Excuse my ignorance, but how short is Kinoko falling in payment?" Dream asks, speaking up with a voice that doesn't sound as if he's apologizing for any ignorance.

He turns questioningly to the council around them, and a young rabbit hybrid - George glances at her seat tag and finds her name: Councilwoman Tina - speaks first, eager and fresh-faced.

"We aren't asking for too much of a change, Sir Dream," She stands up, nervous excitement oozing from her as she speaks, "Currently, the agreement is a twelve-to-one ratio; we pay roughly fifty-six diamond blocks a quarter for six thousand units of redstone. We're only asking that this ratio go down by a fourth, or forty-two diamond blocks a quarter for those six thousand units. We could, perhaps, fill in the missing five hundred diamonds with supplemental resources. The Hermit cities are a huge consumer of our lumber, particularly dark oak and jungle wood, but we have other available types if Boatem would be interested in a trade."

"Grian?" Mumbo asks, "Is that right, about the lumber?"

"As far as I'm aware, yes. We have other providers, but Kinoko *is* our primary supplier of lumber. A few thousand units more could, perhaps, be equitable to what our redstone costs to

process, but we don't particularly benefit from yet more lumber when what we already trade for meets our desires."

"Anything else? Crop production? You're fond of the fungi your famers harvest." Mumbo asks, turning back to George. George looks at Bad.

"Sustainable for the country," Bad interjects, apologetic, "But not for trade this year, due to unforeseen weather conditions cutting the harvest short."

George swallows, "I see. Mining?"

"A lot of that was paused during, uh, during the election period," Tina shuffles her papers, awkwardly, though her voice doesn't waiver. "The basics are up and running now. Copper, iron, coal...enough to sustain us, for now. Five hundred diamonds' worth, though, is another matter."

"You're builders," George directs his attention to Scar, "You were talking about the copper earlier, is there anything we can offer you in regards to that?"

"I'd never say no to more copper -"

"Scar!"

"Alright, we have more than enough copper," Scar says, pouting, "Really, what we need is something both sturdy and complementary. But unless you have blue wood, I don't see how we can come to that kind of agreement."

"To be fair, we do need a lot of blue dye," Mumbo says, "Any luck with lapis in the mines?"

"Not currently," Another council member, a man with long hair and gentle face, his seat tag introducing him as Counsilman McChill, speaks up, "But that's something we can look into, for the future. I'd say we'd need a few months or so to get those mines up and running efficiently. Lapis is deep, deeper than coal, and we've been focusing our efforts on only what has been most crucial to keep the infrastructure going."

"We have our flower gardens," Counsilman Corpse speaks up, deep voice almost difficult to understand within the echoing chamber, "but the same weather conditions that destroyed our fungi harvests took their toll on our other fields. We may be able to fulfill half of the price with our cornflowers."

"That's acceptable. But that leaves roughly two hundred and fifty individual diamonds to contend with and I don't know if we can wait months for your lapis supplies to build up, if they even do." Mumbo says, tapping his chin as he turns back to George, "Depends on how long we renew the trade agreement for, if we can come to an agreement on a renegotiation."

"At least another five years, we hope." Bad says, "Possibly longer if you're amenable, ideally-"

"I'm sorry," Scar interrupts, "But surely King George can speak for your country. If he is signing the contract, we'd like his thoughts on the matter."

Bad's mouth opens but he doesn't say anything. He turns to George, obviously unsure how to proceed.

George does his best not to squirm. The entire courthouse, silent, watches him, waiting for a response.

"I..." he says, looking to Dream for help. Dream finally looks at him, concern in his yellow eyes.

"I won't be." George blurts out, turning to look at the envoy. "Signing the contract, I mean."

"What?" Mumbo's mouth drops open. "Excuse me?"

"No disrespect intended," George hurries to correct himself. "I only meant that the Council of Leadership will be overseeing this matter once the contract has been renegotiated. I've come to facilitate the discussion, out of respect for the traditions of Boatem, but I...my Mourning Retreat is far from over. I don't intend to stay for long."

"As head of state, you'll be responsible for fulfilling the obligations and conditions laid out therein," Grian says with no hint of play to his voice, frowning, "If you're not prepared to sign, then how do we know that it's going to be fulfilled? There is no time limit to grieving, but you were crowned over a year ago, King George. Is Kinoko to be bereft of your company on all state matters for much longer? To whom will this contract be made out to?"

"As the King, I assure you that the contract will be fulfilled. My word is as good as my mother's." George says firmly, coming to a decision even as he speaks. He hopes it's the right one and that this is the right time. "But that word will be fulfilled by the council that sits before you. During my time away, I've come to understand that, perhaps, Kinoko would most benefit from their guidance, as opposed to mine."

"You're abdicating?" Mumbo demands, standing up in shock.

"Is that important to the conversation?" Dream asks sharply, shifting into a casual stance that George recognizes as one that Nightmare appears easily in, "His Majesty paused his Mourning Retreat in order to appear publicly for the benefit of Kinoko and Boatem's continued good relationship. He's here, now, to ensure that the process goes smoothly."

"Of course it's important! How soon is the abdication?" Grian asks, "Because that affects the contract, who it's addressed to and the intricacies of wording and things like that."

"Soon," George starts, but he's cut off by another question.

"Why now?" Mumbo asks, "You've been crowned for over a year. How long has this been in the works? Why weren't we told? When is it to be publicly announced?"

"That's a good point. The political implications of abdicating might mean that the transportation of goods becomes more dangerous, especially if the knighthood is disbanded -" Scar starts, tapping his chin, and the Hermits keep talking, over each other and then over

the Council of Leadership as they begin to respond, some even yelling from across the chamber to be heard.

George turns to give Bad a look. He doesn't know what to do. He's never known what to fucking do. He isn't meant to be here, in this chair, wearing a metaphorical crown he'd been unable to even look at when Skeppy had brought it to him before he and Dream had left the room.

Bad can only shrug helplessly and try to regain control of the situation.

"Please," He says, "I don't see how this is relevant for the trade deal. Kinoko has been operating under the council for a significant period of time! This will be a smooth transfer of power, I can assure you."

"Well, you don't actually have a reassuring history in that department," Grian points out, and suddenly everyone is talking at once. Council members, Hermits. Even Dream tries to put his point across, but George grabs his arm. He's been to enough political meetings to know it's pointless.

It's all pointless. George is pointless here. What help is he? What *use* is he? This was a mistake, this was all a big, stupid mistake. He never should have agreed to this - it's only complicated everything. George isn't a king, he was barely a prince. He belongs far from this room, where people are making real decisions about places they care about, places that mean something to the world at large. *Fuck*.

George needs to get out of here.

Dream turns to him questioningly, but quickly understands without words. George turns his head and meets Bad's eyes again. He's one of the only people not talking loudly over the others, and when he sees George, his expression turns to one of resignation.

Just like Dream, he knows. Perhaps they'd both come to the same conclusion that George had. He's got no business sitting in this oversized chair, under the shadow of a woman who would have turned away in disgust at the kind of king he'd become.

Bad claps his hands loudly, just as he did at the start of the meeting, "*Quiet!*"

The room falls silent, but the envoy isn't happy and neither are any of the council members, and neither is George.

"Let's break for a short recess." Bad says, standing. "Recollect our thoughts and return with the new information in mind. We'll meet again in an hour."

Everyone stands at once, but no one faster than George. He resists the urge to grab Dream's hand.

"We'll be in the back room." He says to Bad.

"Of course, George," Bad says sadly.

“Don’t use that tone.” George snaps. “I’m not a misbehaved child, Bad. You made me a goddamn king. I tried, didn’t I?”

“Of course you did,” Bad drops his voice so no one else can hear them, reaching out to take George’s shoulders. “I’m proud of you, George. No matter how this turns out, I will always be proud of you.”

George scoffs, stepping away from his hands. “Whatever. I’ll see you after the recess.”

“Of course,” Bad says, and George knows that he knows that George is lying to him.

They dip behind the throne, through the door to the break room in the back.

“George,” Dream starts but George waves a hand for quiet. He doesn’t want to be comforted right now. He wants away from this bullshit. He was never supposed to be here.

They sneak out of the secret tunnel, glowstone lighting their way and they’re silent the whole time.

George refuses to speak during their entire escape and Dream looks glum enough that Sapnap doesn’t push it. *Figures* that even their last moments in this damn castle can’t be pleasant.

George takes the lead as they ride out, their horses at a quick canter that makes it sort of impossible to hold much conversation, and it’s within this atmosphere - stressed, tired, anxious - that they spend the next few hours. The sun sets just before they leave the castle and the moon rises steadily as they ride. Sapnap hasn’t a clue where this special little grove of birch forest is, but George is apparently very confident that he does because he doesn’t stop to even glance about for the first few hours of riding.

He does stop, eventually, though, when they’re far from the castle and surrounding town, to break out a map.

Even then, when Quackity had carefully inquired after the meeting, George had only grumpily sniped, “You’d think that after all this trouble to get me to stay, they’d have actually listened to what I was trying to say.”

“Their loss,” Dream had shrugged firmly and Sapnap, understanding that this was a situation in which George was *genuinely* upset, had kept any ribbing to himself. Maybe once George has calmed down, he’ll appreciate a few jokes.

They reach the forest when the moon is high overhead. Karl is yawning by the time the thin, pale trunks of familiar birch emerge, and the horses are beginning to flag so they fall into a slow trot.

“I’ve never actually been to it,” George admits, “I just...know it’s here. It may take us a bit to find it. We’re looking for a warded area, but the wards may have fallen with the throne, so...”

“Hold on,” Karl stretches atop his horse, “I have an enchantment that can seek out warded areas. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“Our little magician,” Sapnap pulls up by Karl’s horse and reaches out to ruffle his hair, much to Karl’s squawking displeasure. Karl smacks him off and Sapnap watches fondly as Karl pulls out a compass and a small pinch of lapis and redstone.

“I am *not* a magician. I am an *alchemist*, don’t compare me to those zealous hacks! Now, everyone be quiet,” Karl commands, tone soft, and Sapnap settles down, watching curiously as Karl sprinkles the lapis and then the redstone over the compass and then cups it in his hands. He brings it to his lips and whispers something and then pulls a vial of clear liquid from his cloak and carefully tips a drop to the compass, hands steady even as his horse huffs and shifts under him.

They all watch, amazed, as the compass begins to glow.

“See?” Karl says smugly. “Much easier than *magicians*.”

“Mhm, that was super sexy of you,” Quackity agrees, “Now lead the way, please, I’m exhausted.”

They follow Karl’s compass deeper into the grove. The trees get thicker and thicker as they travel until, eventually, they’re forced to abandon their horses, though they have to assure both Karl and Quackity that they’re trained to return to the capital from barely a night’s travel away.

George shoulders the enderchest, demanding enough that none of them fight him on it, and they continue on until, finally, the compass leads them to their destination.

The ward is still in place, but it’s weak, just barely clinging onto the last embers of a magic George had put to the sword himself.

Standing in the middle of the woods as the moon shines down, they all take in the shimmering ward. George is the one to reach out, hand hesitant as it hovers over the shimmer.

“Do you think I just...touch it?” He asks, looking at Karl.

“Uh,” Karl shrugs. “Maybe? It depends on the ward. This one is weak, though. It wouldn’t take much to break it.”

“Huh,” George thinks for a second and then holds out a hand, “Give me Schlong or Nightmare.”

“Schlong hates you,” Sapnap says protectively, “Dream, give him Nightmare.”

“Please don’t destroy all of it’s enchantments,” Dream begs, reluctantly unsheathing Nightmare to hand over, “They’re so fresh, George, come on.”

“They’ll be fine.” George scoffs, stepping back. Sapnap subtly catches Quackity and pulls him behind him, out of the danger zone and Quackity goes with an amused expression, because Sapnap has the best fiances in the world, truly.

Nightmare slices through the ward with a sizzle. There is no flash of fading enchantments. In fact, Nightmare nearly keens with the joy of the song, no doubt enjoying the feast of magic, the glutton. The ward shatters.

“See? You were all being babies.” George says, offering Nightmare back blade-up. Carefully, Dream accepts the hilt.

It’s only moments later that they find what they’re looking for. It’s...well. It’s a portal, for sure. It stands vertical where the portal to the End was horizontal, and is comprised of a deep, dark obsidian that glints purple. Sapnap hears a whispering hiss and he jolts, looking around for creepers until he realizes that the sound is coming from the portal, low moans that haunt the very air that surrounds the swirling purple beckoning them closer.

“This is it.” Karl says, voice far away. “The way home.”

“Yeah.” Dream says faintly. And then he turns around, walks away, and throws up into nearby bushes.

“We’re doing great already.” Sapnap says, forcibly bright.

“Yeah,” George agrees dully and goes to check on Dream.

“Do we just...are we just going in?” Quackity asks nervously.

“No,” Sapnap decides. “We’re going to rest for the night, if Karl thinks he can wait just a bit longer.”

“I can,” Karl says, shaking his head savagely. “Yeah. Of course. Yes, we can...we *should* get some rest. Some real rest. We can go in in the morning.”

So that’s what they do. They leave the portal, far enough away that the awful hissing disappears. Sapnap sets up camp with Karl and Quackity while Dream sits in a dead silence and George sits with him, rubbing his hands between his.

They sleep, or they try to, at least. Sapnap wishes that he could say he’d stayed up and kept watch, but he passes out almost as soon as he is lying down, holding Karl and Quackity tightly to him, desperate to pretend for just a while longer that nothing is wrong.

In the morning, they all nibble on a light breakfast of apples and cheese, double check that they have everything they need. Dream and Sapnap help each other strap into the diamond armor while the other three help each other with their leather pieces. Karl likes the staff, which is almost comical to see pulled from the enderchest, and Quackity grimly slides the axe into his belt while George organizes his arrows and slings his bow onto his back.

Sapnap lets Dream take as long as he needs to strap him into the diamond. It’s an old routine, making sure the buckles are tight and fitted well but not too constricting. Dream checks each of them, actually, going from Sapnap to George to Karl to Quackity, unlacing and relacing leather pieces, double-checking weapons and holsters, re-counting the food, going over the

enchantment for endless water with Karl, re-counting the food again, checking Nightmare over for any problems and then doing the same to Schlong.

It's almost midday by the time Dream finally nods, face grim and pale.

"I can't make the call." He admits when Sapnap meets his eye. "I can't."

"Okay," Sapnap says, "I will. We ready to go?" he asks, looking around at the others.

"No," Karl says, lip twitched. He looks upset enough at the admittance that Sapnap leans over and kisses it away lightly.

"We're here." He murmurs, into the space between them, and then, to the group at large, "It was a rhetorical question, anyway. Let's go tell this bitch to leave us alone."

"Yeah!" Quackity says, overly enthusiastic, "Come on, what's one more government to tell to fuck off?"

"Home." Karl whispers.

"No," George corrects. "Just a place that wants to be. But we have a home. Everyone remember that. We have a home, and we're going back to it as soon as we meet the Empress and impress upon her the importance of never talking to you or any of us again."

With nothing else to say, Sapnap leads them to the portal. The hissing is no less awful than last night, but at least it looks a bit less ominous in the daylight. Instead of terrifying, it just looks oddly out of place in the pale woods.

Sapnap steps up. A hand grabs him, nearly yanking him back. He looks over his shoulder, finds Dream's terrified eyes on him, a hand desperately clinging to his arm.

"It's okay." He says firmly. "You're not alone this time. We're together. As long as we're together, nothing else matters."

"Please," Dream practically begs. It kills Sapnap to do this to him, to force him back to this. All he can do in apology is take his hand in his, squeeze it tight.

"Just trust us." He asks of him, "Come on. Come with me."

Sapnap steps up to the portal, the obsidian making up the bottom giving him enough of a ledge to stand on.

"Come with me," He repeats, coaxing, and Dream, trembling so hard that Sapnap can visibly see it, steps up with him.

"I'm so sorry, Dream," Karl swallows, "I'm so, so sorry."

"Shut up!" George says loudly, bursting through the tension, "I'm not scared of this place. It's nothing. None of it matters, none of this matters, because we're going to get through it, and then we're going to go home! I'll go first, idiots!"

George shoves past Sapnap and Dream, much to Sapnap's horror, and hurls himself through the purple. In a flash, he's gone.

"*George!*" Dream nearly shrieks and throws himself through the portal. The last thing Sapnap sees before he falls through with him are Karl and Quackity's shocked, terrified faces.

Chapter End Notes

This note is from me/bramble, specifically

this chapter is my official hermitcraft propaganda. watch hermitcraft. they're great.

Also gavin the creeper plushie exists, he is my plushie and he is very soft and also very mysterious and possibly magical?

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

hey, the new ao3 tags for SMPs!! Everyone celebrate!!! Holy shit, we're so happy :D

We're hitting the last final stretch of this fic and we're so glad to have you all along for the ride. thank u so much for coming on this adventue with us! But don't worry, we've still got a few chapters yet to go...

some trigger warnings for this chapter
graphic descriptions of violence, body horror, discussions of past abuse, discussions on assisted suicide and suicidal identionation.

“If I never have to go through another portal again,” Quackity complains, still squeezing his eyes shut to help with the motion sickness. Maybe he should try chewing that tablet Ranboo gave Karl on the ship.

“That one wasn’t too bad for me,” Sapnap rubs a hand over Quackity’s back; he can only feel it a bit through the leather but he appreciates the touch nonetheless.

“I’m feeling okay.” Karl says quietly and Quackity makes himself open his eyes to look at him.

Karl looks - brighter. Somehow. He isn’t...glowing, nor is it the sort of glow he usually has, where his smile does most of the work. He literally looks brighter, the chestnut of his curls, the death-paleness of his skin, all it seems to *pop* against the hazy redness of their surroundings.

Quackity hesitates, not sure if he’s just...imagining it. But when he looks at Sapnap, he notices the same thing; the red low-lights of his hair, the warmth in his skin, the darkness of his eyes. It’s all *more*.

Okay. Sure. Whatever. New realm, new look. Quackity isn’t going to question it. Instead, he straightens up and looks around, trying to get an understanding for where they’ve ended up.

The first thing he notices is how similar it is to their time in the Crimson Forest. The air is sticky and heavy, he can *feel* it in his lungs when he breathes and it weighs him down. As far as he can see, there is just *red*. A low fog sits on the ground, obscuring their feet from view; in the distance, Quackity can see great falls of lava leaking from rocky outcroppings which hang over giant pools of magma. The world is dim; when he looks up, he sees only red haze instead of a sky. There is no sun, no moon, no void - just the haze.

He hears sounds, not unlike what the portal had emitted. Distant screaming and groaning, sharp shrieks, the crackling of fire. He hears shaky, wheezy breathing, too, coming from behind him - Dream, he knows immediately - but Quackity doesn't look, hoping to give him some privacy to pull himself together as Quackity continues to take in their surroundings.

It's hot. The heat is oppressive, dragging Quackity down immediately. He looks at Karl worriedly, but Karl doesn't even seem to notice it, busy gazing around with wide eyes that Quackity can't read. Sapnap doesn't look bothered, either, which is less surprising, but Quackity can't help the jealousy because, even in his leather armor and cloak, he's already sweltering.

They've been spit into a field, if Quackity had to describe the landscape. Mountains rise around them distantly, and the horizon promises hills soon enough, but the immediate area they've come into is flat and empty. It's a far cry from a nice room and a waiting escort like in the End.

"We need to move." Dream says, making Quackity jump. He'd expected that Dream would need some time, from the panicked breathing he'd heard, but when Quackity turns to look at him, he seems calm and determined. His face is pale and, even in the dimness, Quackity can see how dilated his pupils are, but his voice doesn't shake as he draws Nightmare.

The blade glows, here, just faintly.

"Do you need a minute...?" George asks, obviously thinking each word through very carefully before he says it.

"No." Dream says evenly.

"It's okay if we take a few seconds to breathe," Sapnap offers, tone still carefully neutral.

"I don't need to breathe." Dream brushes him off, and Quackity sees Sapnap's face fall, "We need to get this over with. We need to move."

"Let's get our bearings, at least," Quackity tries, though he has a feeling that it won't work. It's a familiar sight, what Quackity is pretty sure Dream is doing; Sapnap had done it, too. Just locked it all up and focused on the problem at hand.

"We need to move." Dream says again, not even glancing their way. He's busy scanning the area, Nightmare tight in his grip.

"Move where?" George gives in and asks, hands on his hips as he turns in slow circles. He's frowning, looking annoyed but otherwise unbothered except for the sheen of sweat already on his brow. "We're in the middle of nowhere."

"Somewhere," Dream insists. "It's not safe out in the open. Skeleton archers could find us, or piglin. Everyone make sure their gold is visible."

"Karl," Sapnap drags Quackity's attention back to Karl even as Quackity makes sure the gold chain around his neck isn't tucked under his clothes. Sapnap continues when Karl blinks,

turning from his blank stare into the distance to look at them. “Do you still...feel like...I dunno, you know where you’re going? Do you have an idea about how to get to the Court?”

“That’s what the book said,” Quackity remembers, “The bio about the ring-fighter. He knew how to get to the Court when he came to the Nether. It was instinct. Do you feel it?”

Karl frowns, lifting a hand to his chest and pressing it over his heart.

“I don’t...know for sure.” He says, sounding uncertain. Quackity knows he’s lying, as best as he can. Skirting around the question.

“It’s the magic. You can feel it.” Dream wanders a few feet away, peering out toward the hills. “Tell us where to go or I’m going to start going in a direction.”

Karl winces. “There’s a feeling, but I don’t, exactly, know, you know. It’s just a feeling.”

“Just feel a few steps, we’ll go from there,” George encourages, motioning around them, “Dream’s right. This is an ambush waiting to happen.”

“We trust you, Karl,” Sapnap says firmly and that, at least, makes Karl soften.

“This way,” Karl says and points in a direction. Quackity has no way to orient himself, whether Karl is saying North or West or East or South or somewhere inbetween. As best he can tell, Karl’s pointing at the mountains, which is not the best news Quackity has had in the last few days, though it honestly isn’t the worst, either.

“Let’s go.” Dream sets off without hesitation, leaving them all behind without a backwards glance. Quackity pulls a face at George, who looks to Dream with guarded eyes, and they all hustle to catch up to his long-legged strides.

Thus, their travels begin.

Quackity is distinctly reminded of those first few weeks traveling with Sapnap and George, as the hours wear on. It had sucked then and it sucks now. Obviously, Sapnap had inherited his travel pace from Dream because Dream has them on what feels like a jog from the moment they start moving and he doesn’t hesitate to motivate when one of them starts to fall behind. He’s even sharp with George when George stops to check out a small grove of what look like bizarrely purple trees, striped with blue veins and bright blue foliage made of what Quackity thinks may be closer to the heads of mushrooms than leaves.

“I was just -” George starts to complain, but Dream cuts him off with a sharp look and George glares but keeps going without another word from his pressed lips.

Quackity tries his best to keep up and he doesn’t complain. He just puts one foot in front of the other and walks, hoping that he’ll be able to keep up better this time. He isn’t recovering from a life-altering injury, he’s been eating properly, and he isn’t under the same kind of stress as last time - he’ll do better now.

None of them talk, all focused on themselves and their own thoughts. Dream leads with Sapnap and George on either side and watching their perimeter; Quackity stays in the middle

of the group but Karl, who would usually join him, sticks closer to Dream's side to direct him as they move. It's a lonely position, being in the middle, without Karl there to keep him company. They'd spent a lot of those first weeks together making faces, whispering between each other to pass the time - Karl was the only reason Quackity hadn't been left behind.

Without Karl by his side to distract him, and without the others bickering amongst themselves, Quackity has very little to do but...think.

The last day or so had been an exercise in devotedly *not* thinking. Quackity had done his very best from the moment they'd appeared in the castle to the moment they'd ridden out to simply pretend that none of it was happening. He hadn't been able to glance down a single hall of that castle without seeing or hearing a memory he'd have liked nothing more than to forget forever. Thank the gods they hadn't had to go to the throne room; even just being in the gardens had been enough to make him ill. He'd wandered those glowstone paths so often; with Eret after her coronation, and then Technoblade and the boys, with Wilbur on occasion; with Schlatt when Quackity was stressed and couldn't sleep from it all and Schlatt would quietly walk at his side, some of the only times he'd been kind once the coup had happened. To get to Schlatt's towers, where Quackity had lived after Schlatt had permanently moved to the castle, he'd had to walk through those same gardens.

Schlatt had turned the royal study into his office, after the coup. Quackity had sat in that room with the others and determinedly didn't even glance at the corner of the room where Schlatt had beaten him so badly he thought he was going to die, that last morning. He'd been worried, perhaps to the point of paranoia, that if he'd looked in that direction, he'd have seen a faint, dark stain on the stone that marked the occasion. Part of him had, perhaps more worriedly, wondered if it would be spotless, the entire horrific event erased from the history of the room. He'd walked each hall and each path and tried, with every coping skill he'd developed in the last two years, to not let himself ruminate on any part of the life he'd left behind when they'd ditched Kinoko Kingdom.

It's difficult to not ruminate with nothing to distract him. The Nether is hot and the distant cries of piglin and mobs remind him heavily of desperately trying to cross the Crimson Forest and the fire swamp; the tension within the party is eerily reminiscent of the same trip. Quackity feels the heaviness of a book that doesn't exist anymore in the bag he carries for Karl, the urge to roll a cigarette welling up. Fuck, he could do with some nicotine, at the very least. He should have packed some.

His thoughts wander; from counting his steps to counting minutes, to wondering what kind of stamina non-avians have that makes it possible for all of them to stay on pace except for him. He manages to keep up for a long time, even over the rougher terrain as they move on from the flat fields to the low hills to the more mountainous paths - but hours wear on, though the light never changes. It's always the hazy red, the only time that the Nether seems to have, and when Quackity stops counting the minutes and steps, he loses track of how long they walk for. Occasionally, George or Sapnap will complain about a break but Dream always has the same answer - not until they're in a safe spot. Eventually, they stop asking, though Sapnap grows more and more mutinous each time Dream shoots him down.

Quackity doesn't kick up a fuss, not wanting to slow the group. The faster they reach their destination, the faster they can leave.

He tries to ignore it when he starts to grow tired, and then achy, and then exhausted. He tries to keep up, but Dream doesn't glance behind him to check that he's being followed and Karl seems to be almost entranced, just staring ahead, and both George and Sapnap are focused on watching for threats. In the middle, Quackity begins to fall behind.

As he watches them gain distance, Quackity finds himself wondering if Schlatt, too, had felt this intense heat, this heavy air, the stench of burning. He finds himself wondering, in the wake of his visit to Kinoko and the Nether, if Schlatt had regretted any of it, when he'd ended up here. How long had Schlatt lasted, without preparation and a group dedicated to his survival?

Quackity knows that if he calls out, they'll stop. They'll take a break. Schlatt wouldn't have had that, if he'd survived being dragged into the Nether at all. He would have been alone, and injured, confused and betrayed, angry. Always angry.

Had he lived long enough to feel the withdrawals, had the need for his chosen poisons prickled at him the way Quackity's need for a cigarette does now? When he held himself too tensely, Schlatt had almost debilitating migraines and Quackity had spent long hours in the dark, rubbing his neck and shoulders to help alleviate the pain of them, running hands through Schlatt's hair and massaging his temples; had Schlatt had one while he'd been here? With no one to help him, or dim the lights and speak softly? Bring him water or crackers or a glass of whiskey, as Quackity had?

When Schlatt had tried to sacrifice Quackity to the throne, had he remembered all the softest moments between them? The love that Quackity had given him so freely, almost from the moment Schlatt had taken him in? Had it been a bitter thing to remember, as Schlatt had tried to survive in this hellscape?

Had he thought of Quackity, when he died? Had he missed him? Had he wished for Quackity's cool hands in his final moments? What had those moments been like? Had he even had them, yet, or was he stubbornly wandering the Nether, alone and miserable?

Quackity wishes he could stop thinking about him. He doesn't actually want to know the answer to any of these questions. He doesn't want to think about Schlatt, or the good moments between them, or the awful ones. They make his wings tingle and ache even hidden under his shirt, phantom fingers on phantom feathers that don't exist anymore. That had been tossed in Schlatt's garbage, after he'd cut them off of Quackity's body in a drunken rage, right in front of Quackity as he'd bled on the sheets they'd so often shared.

Thinking about Schlatt, where he was and how he'd died, serves him just as well as thinking about those pieces of himself, bone and flesh and feather that existed, once, somewhere else in the world where he would never find them. It's ultimately useless, all of it.

Gods, does Quackity wish he could stop thinking about it.

He stumbles, foot catching on a rock he doesn't see for how it blends so seamlessly into the pale red of the dirt. He catches himself on a craggy outcrop, even the dirt and rock almost hot enough to burn.

"Shit," He hears Sapnap say from a distance as he tries to struggle up and realizes that he can't. He's hot, and exhausted, his feet and legs hurt and his lungs ache from breathing such damp, dank air. His mind is fuzzy, chasing itself with thoughts of Schlatt and Kinoko and the Nether and how hot he is. Instead of continuing to attempt to get up, he lets himself fall slowly, sitting down and putting his head between his knees as he tries to catch his breath. He hadn't realized he was sweating so badly until he starts to wipe his face and realizes that he's soaked through.

"Q," Sapnap says, much closer this time. "Fuck, hey, angel, look at me,"

"I'm fine," Quackity mumbles as Sapnap kneels in front of him, setting the enderchest down so he can check him over, "Jus'...gimme a sec...I'm fine."

"What's wrong?" Dream approaches, the green of his cloak and the blue of his armor bright against the backdrop of smoggy red, "What's going on?"

"I think Quackity is getting too hot," Sapnap says as Quackity shakes his head.

"I'm not," Quackity tries to argue, even as his stomach starts to roll as he's finally still enough for it to catch up to him.

"We need to take a break. I told you we needed to take more breaks!" Sapnap ignores him, "We've been going for long enough, Q, I'm gonna take off the leather, okay?"

"I can keep goin'," Quackity insists, but he doesn't even have enough strength to pull his arm back when Sapnap starts unlacing his bracer and he gives in quickly enough when trying to fight just makes his stomach rise in his throat.

"This isn't a safe place to stop," Dream says. Quackity's eyes close as a heave of dizziness overtakes him so he can't see Dream's face, but he knows it isn't pleased.

"We can't keep going," Sapnap argues, pulling one bracer off and then the other, "Baby, sit back, I need to get the rest off,"

Quackity lets himself be manhandled, the leather peeling from his sweat-soaked shirt unbecomingly. He hadn't realized how wet he was.

"It isn't safe. Can you carry him?"

"No, Dream, I can't carry him! We need to get him under the tent and cool him off before he has a heat stroke!"

"At least get over the mountain!" Dream presses.

"Dream," Sapnap says with force, "I'm not moving right now and neither is Quackity. Just keep going and we'll catch up, if you're that stressed about it!"

"I'm not leaving you," Dream snaps, "I just want to move him somewhere safer!"

"Well, he can't move right now, so deal with it for a minute!"

"*Sapnap*," George cuts in severely, "Knock it off. Dream, go find a cave."

"But -"

"I *said* go find a cave," George interrupts Dream's argument, "Karl, go with him."

After a few tense seconds, Quackity hears footsteps leading away.

"Don't say something like that to him." George says when the steps have disappeared, forced patience straining his tone.

"He -"

"No." Quackity hears George drop down next to him, the enderchest opening and George rummaging around. "Think about what you're saying before you say it."

"...fuck. You're right." Sapnap groans, voice subdued, "Shit. I didn't - I didn't mean it like that. It's just, we've been asking for breaks for hours. He can't run us into the ground like this, George, we haven't even been here half a day yet."

"Next time one of us *needs* a break, we'll make him take it. We're going to need to be more proactive about things, because his head isn't on straight." George touches Quackity again, this time with something blessedly cool and wet. The change in temperature is enough to make Quackity flinch, but the wet cloth on the back of his neck is appreciated. "And certain people need to speak up, too."

"Sorry." Quackity whispers, wincing as more cold is applied to his face. "I'm wasting water right now."

"I meant you need to say when you need a break. We have infinite water, idiot, I don't give a shit about the water." George says simply. "Shut up and cool off."

Quackity is pretty sure this is George's way of saying he should rest so he closes his mouth and does so. He ends up leaning back with his head in Sapnap's lap and his feet elevated off the ground, cool cloth on his neck and under his shirt, sipping from a waterskin slowly and trying to breathe evenly until his heart calms down.

Dream and Karl return soon, approaching as Sapnap uses Karl's journal to fan Quackity's face.

"Have you cooled down at all, Big Q?" Karl asks with concern as he joins Sapnap, pressing blessedly cool knuckles to Quackity's cheek.

"Yeah," Quackity nods, "A lot better. I'm not so dizzy."

“We found a place,” Dream says, arms crossed as he stands farther back. “It’s about a five minute walk, but it’s shaded. We can set up camp and rest for a while.”

“Good.” George stands up from the rock he’d been sitting on, stretching, “I’m exhausted. How long have we been walking? This place is throwing off my internal clock.”

“Six hours, maybe,” Dream shrugs, glancing at Quackity. There might be a hint of apology in his eyes, but he doesn’t say it. Instead, he unclasps his cloak, jaw ticking as he pulls it from his shoulders. “Here. This will help.”

The idea of adding another layer of clothing to his body right now makes him physically ill, but Quackity recognizes the gesture for what it is. Whatever, he’ll just faint again.

“Thanks, Dream,” He says weakly as Dream lays the cloak over him.

The material is heavy, still smelling faintly of magic, as it settles over him. Quackity closes his eyes, bracing himself for when the heat begins to build again, but it doesn’t happen. Instead of trapping the heat, as he expects, a sensation of coolness washes over him, not quite beating the heat back but making it infinitely more bearable.

“Holy shit,” he says, finally able to relax against the ground, “Oh my god,”

“What?” Sapnap frowns, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Karl smooths a hand over the cloak and Quackity blinks his eyes open to watch him talk, “It’s enchanted against heat. It helps keep you cool as the temperature rises.”

“Will you be okay without it?” George frowns, looking at Dream critically.

Already, sweat is on Dream’s brow. He’s pushed his shoulders back and he still stands straight, lips pressed together.

“I’ll be fine. Let’s get to the cave. It isn’t -”

“It isn’t safe,” Sapnap repeats, “Okay. We hear you, we’re moving.”

Dream makes a face at him but turns around, scanning their surroundings as Sapnap looks Quackity over.

“I can walk,” Quackity promises, feeling better with the cloak to help.

“I’d rather carry you,” Sapnap insists, “Save your strength.”

“You’ll need it for tomorrow,” Karl agrees, “Let Sap help you out, hm? You can feel him up while you’re on his back, that’ll be fun!”

“Groping each other in times of stress is not the healthy coping mechanism you think it is,” Sapnap sighs, like his favorite de-stressing activity isn’t running his fingers through Quackity’s wings.

“Are you saying I can’t?” Quackity lets himself pout, hoping that it will make them laugh a little, chase some of the worry off their faces, and it works. Sapnap smiles and Karl giggles and Quackity feels accomplished enough that he allows Sapnap to bully him into sitting up. Karl helps him climb onto Sapnap’s back and drapes Dream’s cloak over him once he’s clinging with Sapnap’s hands under his thighs and his arms over his shoulders. Quackity can’t help but go lax under the cooling enchantment, breathing shallowly to give his burning lungs a break.

The cave isn’t far, just as Dream said. It’s shallow, just barely enough room for them to set up the tent for some shade and not big enough at all for the camp beds. They spread out the blankets on the ground, instead, and Quackity finds himself under the fanning hands of his fiances as he is finally able to cool off with the help of water and Dream’s cloak.

“I’ll take first watch,” Dream says as they settle in and his cloak is returned to him.

“I’ll come with you,” Sapnap starts to stand up, having stripped his leather off to cool down, but Dream waves him off firmly.

“I don’t need help. Two people might give our position away.” He says shortly. “Everyone rest. Tomorrow, we’ll take more breaks.”

“Dream,” Sapnap tries to say but Dream leaves the tent, letting the flap close behind him, and Sapnap stares after him, hurt plain.

“Damn it.” George curses.

“I really thought...” Sapnap rubs his face, “I’d hoped us being here would make it easier.”

“Give him some space,” Karl advises quietly. “We knew this would be awful for him.”

“Whatever,” George huffs, his concern coming out as annoyance. He lays down, back to them, and goes silent.

“Come on, Q,” Sapnap sighs, turning his attention back to Quackity, “Let’s get you cooled down.”

Quackity, heat-sick and exhausted, focuses on getting his body under control and tries, perhaps desperately, to stop thinking.

Dream refuses to take shifts. By the time Quackity wakes up, both Sapnap and George have attempted to make him come into the tent and have been sent back with their tail between their legs.

He looks like he hasn’t slept, when Quackity emerges; focused and severe, circles bruising under his eyes. There’s little by way of his usual softness; no quick smile when he catches Quackity’s eye, no fond hand at George’s side, or playful teasing with Karl or Sapnap over their rations. He eats half of an apple, says he isn’t hungry when George tries to urge him to finish it, ignores him when Sapnap reminds him that they’ve brought plenty.

Karl is quiet, too. He's been quiet since he woke up and becomes quieter still, barely responding unless it's to a direct question. He looks *guilty*, though Quackity can't imagine why. When he can, he slips a hand into Karl's and squeezes tight. That, at least, pulls a smile from him, and as long as he can still do that, Quackity will be content.

They pack the tent and blankets away after they've all eaten, an uneasy quiet between all of them, but a tension between George, Sapnap, and Dream unlike anything Quackity is used to.

It's been less than a full day, as far as Quackity knows, and the Nether is already wearing away at them. It doesn't bode well for the rest of their journey.

Quackity frets about it as he packs up the enderchest, Sapnap helping George and Karl back into their leather. He wants to fix this, somehow. He doesn't know how they're supposed to do this when they're already fighting.

"Q," Dream says, suddenly enough despite his quiet tone that Quackity rocks to his feet in surprise.

"Dream." Quackity whirls around, nerves frayed. "Hey."

Is he in trouble? Is Dream still angry about him slowing them down yesterday? Using too much water? Not speaking up? There's a lot that Dream could be upset about when it comes to Quackity, and Quackity can't even blame him. This place is fucked, and Dream is under stress, and Quackity is making life hard for them, slow and overheating and not asking for help even when he knows that he needs it and they'll give it freely.

"I, um," Dream hesitates, eyes dropping. "Just wanted to apologize."

Quackity blinks. "Apologize...?" He frowns, though he knows he shouldn't feel as thrown as he does. "What?"

"For yesterday," Dream continues. "I was focused on moving. I should have checked on you guys more. I definitely should have called a few breaks in weather like this."

"I should have said something," Quackity protests. "Don't - it's not your fault."

"It isn't yours, either." Dream lifts his hand and Quackity looks down, realizes that Dream is holding out his cloak, roughly folded. "Here."

"You need that," Quackity says dumbly.

"The cooling thing is meant to help, you know. With the anxiety," Dream smiles weakly, the first smile Quackity has seen since they found the portal. "I can promise you I'm not going to get any less anxious just because I'm not as hot. Take it. It'll help you. Share it with George if you guys need to."

"But..." Quackity hesitantly reaches out, accepting the cloak. "Dream..."

"Relax," Dream hesitates again, Quackity sees him think about it, and then he reaches up and ruffles Quackity's hair, careful and light. Quackity has seen him do this to Sapnap before, and

George. It sends a bolt of warmth through him - the kind of warmth that he doesn't hate.

"Just take care of yourself," Quackity mutters under Dream's hand, flushing.

"I'll be fine. You'll be fine. Karl will be fine, and so will Sapnap and George. I'll make sure of it." Dream lets his hand drop and steps back.

"*We* will make sure of it." Quackity corrects.

"We will." Dream repeats with another smile, though it doesn't look the most sincere, and Quackity watches him walk away, feeling somehow both reassured and not all at once.

They set off. As Dream promised, they take breaks as they walk; Quackity stays cool enough under the cloak and he drinks more water than he thinks necessary, hoping to avoid the sweatiness that had already chased him into his only extra set of clothes. Sapnap sticks closer to him today and George makes it his mission to talk, trying to drag them all into conversations. He even prods Dream and manages to drag out a few short responses that feel like a victory to Quackity.

Quackity loses track of time again, but he knows that it's hours into the walk when Karl says, "We're getting close to something."

"What?" Dream stops, frowning, "Do you know what it is?"

"No." Karl admits. "Just...something."

"Great," Sapnap says with forced cheer, "I love somethings."

Karl grimaces in a smile, and they continue on.

"A camp," George says only half an hour later, making the group pause again, "Look, it's a camp."

And a camp it is. A rough shelter made of that blue not-foliage laid over bright blue branches, half collapsed. The remains of a fire scattered across the campsite. Blood. A body, picked clean, in scraps of clothes. Hoofprints flattened across the dry earth, a stampede of prints.

Quackity tries not to look too closely as they pause just outside the destroyed camp. It's *not*, and he knows that, it's statistically impossible that it could be - but. But. He doesn't want to see, to know. He doesn't want to peer too closely at that corpse and see horns, or no horns. He doesn't want answers.

"It's out in the open," he says, turning fully away from the scene. He pulls Dream's cloak tighter around him, a refreshing coolness running down his limbs. Instinctively, he's tensed his wings under their protective layers of shirt and leather and cloak and they twinge in discomfort, no longer used to being pinned and hidden away.

"It wasn't safe." Dream says with a shrug. "Let's move on."

“Should we bury them, at least?” Sapnap hesitates. “They were probably...”

“A stray.” Karl finishes for him. “No. I have a feeling we’re going to need to get used to this.”

“Dead people?” George frowns, “That isn’t lovely to hear, Karl.”

“It’s not lovely to think either, my friend,” Karl sighs.

“This won’t be us.” Dream says firmly. “Come on. We don’t know where the hoglin came from or if they come through here often.”

Quackity doesn’t hesitate to follow him when he walks away from the camp. The others slowly follow, as well. Only Sapnap stays, for just a moment, before he catches up.

It’s only half an hour later that the *something* Karl mentioned is revealed.

It appears on the horizon, peeking through the fog. Towering and dark, the structure looms over them.

“This is it.” Karl whispers.

“This is the court?” Quackity asks, eyes wide.

“No,” Karl swallows. “But we have to go through it to reach the Court.”

“Great,” George frowns, “I wonder if it’s cooler inside.”

“For Prime’s sake,” Sapnap rubs his face, “Can’t her hypothetical human husband just drop down with his insufferable son and get us an audience?”

“That she’s looking for an insufferable son of her own is the main issue here, my love,” Karl sighs.

Quackity doesn’t have much to say to that, swallowing roughly as he gazes up at the building.

“What the fuck is it?” He finds himself asking instead.

“The Bastion.” Karl says. “I...don’t know how I know that. But it’s the Bastion.”

“I hate it.” George sighs. “I hate all of this.”

“Agreed.” Dream draws Nightmare, its gentle hum filling the air as it senses that it will be fed soon.

Quackity hopes the sword is wrong. He hopes that they walk in, find the map of the building, and just casually walk to the Court. He hopes.

Quackity knows it’s false hope, but Gods, does he hold to it.

“Are we ready to go in?” Sapnap asks hesitantly.

“Let’s eat.” Dream decides. “Take a rest and muster our strength. Then we can go in.”

“It’ll be fine.” Quackity says, trying to be positive.

“Yeah,” George agrees, matching his tone.

They’re both lying, and all five of them know it. They say the words despite that. Maybe to manifest, maybe to just attempt to drum up some cheer.

Quackity will keep saying them, though, and he hopes that George keeps backing him up. He hopes that it keeps happening. He hopes.

He trusts his friends.

It’s never that Dream doubts them. He knows that Sapnap and George are capable fighters and he knows that Karl and Quackity have been able to hold their own for their entire lives before now. He knows that even if he just disappeared, they’d be able to handle themselves - it had happened and they had. They’d handled it with a strength that he knows he wouldn’t have had if he’d been in either Sapnap or George’s place; he hadn’t, after all. He’d failed. He’d accepted the Warden’s magic just to get out and be with them again, hadn’t he? He’d almost lost his humanity in order to return to them. He’d almost lost his humanity in this place.

He trusts his friends, but he doesn’t think that any of them understand exactly how endless a pit of agony this place is. None of them fear the steps they take like he does; none of them *know*. The heat burns his skin; it feels like he’s being boiled alive from the inside out.

The Bastion is no protection from the dangers of the outside. It reminds him of the fortress he’d spent years in; tall, imposing, simultaneously suffocating and too open. The blackstone gleams in the fiery falls of lava that paint the outside; windows like giant, empty eyes stare down at them as they stand at the entrance. Dream can just see the top of the structure from this angle - he isn’t sure how, exactly, this place connects to the Inbetween but if Karl says they have to go up, then they have to go up.

“It’s dangerous,” Karl says.

“No shit,” Dream shakes his arms out, twisting as he stretches his shoulder blades out one after the other, loosening his tense body up. “We’ll make it through.”

“To the top, right?” Sapnap asks, echoing Dream’s movements.

“To the top.” Karl confirms, though he sounds apologetic. Dream hates it. He wishes that Karl didn’t have to think of this as his fault, but Dream hasn’t figured out the words that will work to reassure him yet. It’s not important right now, as much as Dream wishes that Karl’s feelings could be at the top of his priority list.

For now, his focus has to be on this fucking Bastion.

Nightmare pulses in his palm as he grips the hilt. Dream grips it tighter, a silent promise for what the netherite craves. He looks the group over; Karl and his staff, Sapnap with Schlong drawn, Quackity nervously gripping his axe, George shrugging his bow off his shoulder and fixing his quiver for optimal drawing.

Dream hesitates, for just a moment. He wants to reach out and touch George, to make sure he's real. Make sure that this is real and that Dream isn't just...dreaming it all up. Being back in the Nether makes him wonder if he'd ever really left. If he'd just been dreaming of escape, when really he's been stuck all along and this is just him waking up.

If he touches George, he knows that he can't be dreaming. He's never been able to touch George in his dreams, not since he was young. George was always just out of reach, just inches from his fingertips; watching with a teasing smile, a laugh that brought a flutter to Dream's spirits. Coaxing but never within reach.

He isn't smiling now, nor is he coaxing, but Dream can't bring himself to reach out. He thinks that if George isn't there, or if he's too far, it might break him.

"George," Dream says before he can stop himself. George looks at him, brows furrowed.

"What?" he asks, tone short with obvious nerves.

Dream opens his mouth, not sure what to say. *Don't leave me* and *I'm sorry* and *I'm scared* and *I'll keep you safe*; it all mixes on his tongue.

George's eyes soften as Dream stares at him like a fool, and that's too much. Dream shakes his head and turns away, eyes skating past Sapnap and the lingering hurt from the day before.

"Let's go," He says and steps forward, toward the open gate of the entrance.

The difference in lighting is almost immediate. Though the stone of the walls is pockmarked and shattered to dust in some parts, they kill almost all of the light. The inside of the Bastion is near pitch black, illuminated only by the dim glow of molten lava as it sluggishly glides down the walls into pools and the thin eking of red-tinted glow from the small windows that line the walls near the ceiling, where they haven't collapsed in on themselves into rubble.

Dream can barely see the first few feet in front of him, thanks only to Nightmare's faint glow, but he pushes forward, deeper into the Bastion, in the hopes that a light source will reveal itself. It does not; just the lava, which doesn't do much for lighting, for how deeply red it burns.

"I can't see," George mutters, breaking the tense silence.

"Me, either," Quackity admits.

"I can." Karl says and joins Dream, looking around carefully, "Not a whole lot, but enough."

"What's this place look like?" Sapnap asks, "Do you see anyone?"

Karl looks around slowly, turning in a circle on his heels.

“It’s a big, empty room.” He decides. “I don’t see anyone. This is a greeting hall, I think.”

“Do you see a way up? A door?” Dream steps closer to the group, trying to keep them all in sight but struggling as they all start to spread out to explore. None of them go far enough to warrant being called back but he still has to bite his tongue against the instinct, annoyance and worry warring inside of him as George approaches one of the lava pools and Quackity kneels to get a closer look at something on the floor. He wants them all by his side, where he can easily protect them.

“No,” Karl frowns, “Let me...look around. I’ll try to find something.”

“Sapnap, go with him,” Dream motions and Sapnap shoots him a look, probably not happy about being ordered around, but joins Karl as he starts to get farther away in his explorations. Dream stays closer to George and Quackity, eyes sharp as he tracks them in the darkness, ears straining for signs of danger.

Nothing happens. Karl calls out, eventually, to say he’s found something and the five of them file their way to a rusted iron door, which shrieks as Sapnap and Dream wrench it open. George, arrow notched and prepared to fly in the face of anything waiting on the other side, lowers his arm slowly when all that is revealed are crumbling stone steps.

“Other strays have come through here, obviously,” he frowns, “I guess they cleared the place out.”

“Let’s still be careful.” Dream cautions as George steps through the door and starts up the stairs.

“Of course we’ll be careful.” Sapnap says dismissively as he follows behind George, “But you gotta relax a little bit, dude. At this rate, you’re going to crack before we even meet anything to fight with.”

Dream bites back his immediate response, which is to tell Sapnap that he has no idea what he’s talking about and is going to get them all killed if that is the attitude he’s walking around with. Instead, he just releases a hissing breath and motions sharply for Karl and Quackity to go first so he can be rearguard.

Half-way up the stairs, a smell Dream is well-familiar with reaches them. It’s rot and heat. Upstairs, they find the remains of a fierce battle, after George and Sapnap shove the door open against a heavy weight that turns out to be a pile of corpses.

It’s where the stench comes from, four piglin in gold armor piled in front of the door. They’ve baked in the closed heat of the Bastion - bodies rotting in the armor and scraps of clothing they wear. The room is damp with death, and George gags, covering his mouth and nose with his shirt, which the others quickly copy. Dream doesn’t bother, he just discards it as an unimportant detail, along with the tiredness that pulls at his eyes and the way his body feels ever-closer to simply shaking apart.

There are three other piglin sprawled in the room, once again lit by flowing lava but with now with the addition of lanterns hanging from thin chains attached to the high ceiling.

Dream looks around slowly, maps out the fight as he thinks it happened. Whoever cleared the way before them came up through the stairs and met a small group. They fought them, dispatching the four with brutal efficiency; there is blood, and plenty of it. The bodies seem to be mauled. Dream is reminded of how Karl had acted on the ship during their battle with the other pirates; it had been a massacre and this echoes the uninhibited violence. Dream thinks that the other three piglin must have shown up after their predecessor had piled the bodies together in front of the door to prevent that very thing from happening, coming from another direction. Like the piled piglin, the three laid out elsewhere were brutalized, pieces of them laying out across the floor. The trail of shriveled, dried out organs and flesh lead into the shadows of the room.

"I'm going to be sick," George mutters, muffled through his shirt. "Let's get out of here."

Their steps echo against the blackstone. Dream continues to listen out for any sounds but not even the echoing cries of the monsters outside make it past the walls; it's completely silent except for them and the crackling of the lava.

"We should try to pull down one of the lanterns," Quackity suggests, pointing up, and Dream follows the line of his finger to one of the lanterns. It's too high for any of them to reach, but maybe if Dream lifted George onto his shoulders, they may be able to get it. Not for the first time, he curses the fact that he didn't think to bring at least one of the torches. They'd left them all at the campsite outside the portal in preparation for their return. Stupid. Shortsighted. It's embarrassing. Dream had been so lost in his panic that he hadn't fucking *thought* and now he was about to try to pull down a lantern from a crumbling stone structure just to get a bit more sight into the darkness.

"George," he motions, moving to stand under the lantern and kneel, "Come get on my shoulders."

"Oh, no," George shakes his head, "Absolutely not."

"Come on, George, you're taller than Quackity," Dream motions impatiently, "We need a light source."

"You're going to drop me!"

"When have I ever dropped you?" Dream demands, offended.

"I was seventeen and you tried to lift me up to a window to get back into the courthouse and your weedly little legs gave out and you dropped me right into a bush!"

"That was almost a decade ago, George." Dream says incredulously.

"My face has a sensory memory of that bush bashing into it," George bitches, but he still reluctantly approaches.

Dream realizes as George swings one leg over his shoulder that he'll have to set Nightmare down in order to brace George's thighs, which was an oversight. He hesitantly sets his sword aside, reaching up to grip George's knee as George awkwardly settles his other leg.

“You know, you usually have your head between my thighs for much more enjoyable reasons,” George mutters, just loud enough for Dream to hear him. Dream’s cheeks heat but he ignores the jibe, slowly lifting from his kneel with George perched precariously on his shoulders. George squawks, the fingers of one hand coming to nervously thread through Dream’s hair. The other hand clutches at Dream’s on his leg. Dream feels the way his legs tense, knowing he’s using all of his core strength to stay up.

“You’re okay,” Dream reassures him, once he’s stable and straightened up, “Just reach up and grab the lantern.”

“I don’t think I can let go of you,” George says shakily, hands tightening on Dream’s person.

“That’s very romantic, but I need you to get the lantern,” Dream insists, trying to keep his tone reassuring, but it hardens as he notices Quackity inching deeper into the room in the opposite direction to Karl and Sapnap and he snaps, “Quackity, stay close. Come and spot George.”

“Sorry, sorry!” Quackity jumps as he whirls around and practically scampers back to their side, “George, I’m behind you.”

“Oh, good, if I fall then I’ll flatten you before I crack my head open!”

“I’m not going to drop you!” Dream glares up, just barely able to see George above him, “Trust me.”

“Don’t pull that card,” George grumbles, but he very slowly pulls his hand from Dream’s and reaches up. “I need to be higher.”

Dream lifts onto his toes and feels George’s fingers leave his hand. He hears the squeak of the lantern, the clanging of chain, sees the way the light sways on the blackstone.

“Almost,” George whispers. He sways suddenly and Dream moves with him, taking a step back and feeling George’s hand return to his hair with a painful grip, “D-Dream, stop!”

“Stop what!? I’m keeping you from falling!”

“Do better!”

“You haven’t fallen yet, just get the lantern!”

“Fine! Maybe I will!”

Dream bites back a response, refusing to play into the bickering, annoyance warring with a slow-growing panic. He can’t see Karl or Sapnap anymore, just their distant talking if he strains his ears. His hands itch to hold Nightmare instead of George. They’re surrounded by darkness and lava and he doesn’t have his sword in his hand. He’s vulnerable and stuck holding up George, and he isn’t sure if this move was worth giving Nightmare up if George isn’t going to take it seriously and actually get the damn lantern.

George huffs his own irritation, hand leaving Dream's hair again. There's a clang, the lightsource shifts violently, George lurches. Dream lurches with him, hands leaving George's thighs to grab at his hips as George releases a cut off shriek and leans forward over Dream's head, trying to correct and throwing them off again. Dream grits his teeth, arms straining, but he gets his feet under him and keeps his stance solid as he balances them out again. He can hear George's quick breathing, feel how tense his thighs are as he nearly squeezes Dream's head between them.

"G-got it," George says breathlessly.

"Give it to Q," Dream orders and George wordlessly lowers the lantern for Quackity to take. Dream kneels again, ducking out from under George so he can get his footing. George stumbles but catches himself as Dream looks around for Nightmare, finding the sword only a few inches away.

"Gee, thanks," George mutters, straightening up, "That sucked, by the way, thanks for asking."

"I wasn't going to drop you." Dream says, trying not to let the irritation bleed into his voice. "If you'd just trusted me and grabbed it, you could have been done quicker."

"Sorry I'm not used to perching on your shoulder like a parrot," George crosses his arms defensively, "Maybe a few seconds to get used to it would have helped."

"I have the lantern," Quackity says.

"Every second counts here, George." Dream glances at him sharply, letting Nightmare settle back in his palm comfortably. "We don't have time to get used to things. We just do them and move on."

"*We* don't. *You* do." George snaps, not bothering to hide his irritation at all.

"Call it a skill, then," Dream shrugs, turning his back to them. With the lantern closer to the ground, now, he can make out the floor. It's stained, something coating the stone texture. Ashy blood, Dream would guess.

"The lantern, guys," Quackity repeats, holding the lantern up.

"I'll call it a trauma response, which is the only reason I don't call *you* an absolute dickhead right now." George says shortly and Dream turns to glare at him but George's back is to him, now, as he marches into the darkness.

"George!" Dream calls after him, frustration and worry bubbling up as George disappears out of the scope of the lantern that Quackity still holds out. "At least come stand in the light, for fuck's sake!"

"Fuck you, I'm going to Sapnap and Karl's team!" Is the response that comes out of the darkness.

“We’re on the same team!” Dream argues, but he just gets a loud scoff from George and it ruffles his feathers enough that he lets George go, at least sure enough that he won’t walk himself into danger in this room.

He turns to Quackity, drawing himself up when he finds that he’s being stared at as if he has a second head.

“What?” He demands, perhaps too defensively, “Are you mad at me, too?”

“No,” Quackity is quick to assure him, “Just...I’ve never seen you like this.”

“Like what?” Dream meets his eyes, refusing to back down, “Concerned about our safety? Aware of my surroundings and how much danger we’re in?”

“Scared.” Quackity says simply enough that it knocks the wind out of Dream’s sails.

“I’m not scared.” He lies.

“I don’t have to smell it to know that you are.” Quackity lowers the lantern, the gentle flame illuminating only a few feet around them. The darkness seems to eat the light, leaving them in a spot not much better than they were in before they got the stupid lantern.

“Well, who wouldn’t be? None of you are scared enough. Maybe I’m just filling in the gaps.” Dream motions and starts walking in the direction George went. Fuck, if he loved him any less, he’d let the stupid man just wander to his death in the fucking dark. He’s probably got less sight than all of them, with his color blindness!

“We’re scared,” Quackity admits, starting to move. He doesn’t go as fast as Dream, though, and refuses to match Dream’s pace, so Dream has to slow to his to stay within the light. “Of course we are. I’m scared, at least. I’m scared for Karl, mostly, but I’m scared for you, too. And other things. This place isn’t...it’s not good.”

“It isn’t,” Dream agrees, feeling as if the words are an understatement. “You don’t have to be scared for me.”

“Well, I am. And I think the other three are, too. You’re not acting like yourself. Not the you that I know.”

Dream clenches his fist around Nightmare’s hilt.

“You don’t get to be nice here.” He says quietly. “You die that way.”

“If being nice is what’s going to kill you, then I’ll bet Schlatt is running the place by now.” Quackity says casually and Dream misses a step, turning to look owlishly at him.

“Schlatt’s dead.” He says, sure of it. “He wouldn’t have survived here. Not even for a night.”

“Maybe.” Quackity shrugs. “I keep thinking about him, though. Crazy what this place brings up, huh?”

“Well...” Dream trails off awkwardly. “That’s normal, I think. That he’s haunting you. The Nether is the last known location you have for him.”

“Is that what’s happening to you?” Quackity stops. “Are you being haunted, Dream?”

“We were talking about you.”

“That isn’t a no.” Quackity frowns, lifting the lantern up again to bring light to him. Dream stands, stone-faced, and lets Quackity look as much as he wants. Whatever he’s looking for, he won’t find it. Dream isn’t going to crack.

“It isn’t a yes, either.”

“I think,” Quackity says carefully. “That the you I’m seeing right now is very similar to the you that I first met. Jumpy, snappy...stressed. Like you’d just come back from war. And now you’re back in the war zone. It makes sense if you feel like that again.”

“I don’t.” Dream says firmly. It feels like a lie.

“Sure,” Quackity reaches out uncertainty and ends up pressing his hand to Dream’s back. He can’t feel it much through the armor. “Just...remember that you aren’t alone this time. It isn’t like it was before.”

“Because we’re getting out,” Dream agrees, stepping away from his hand, “Soon.”

“And because if something goes wrong, you don’t have to take care of it alone.”

“It would be easier if I did.”

“No, it wouldn’t.” Quackity scoffs, lips twitching up. “Even when you’re pissed, you want us around. You like us. You *love* us. How embarrassing.”

Dream glares, feeling called out and flustered.

“You all have the survival instincts of day-old kittens.” Dream says firmly. “I know how Sapnap and George managed to get this far, but I have no clue what was looking out for you and Karl.”

“Luck,” Quackity grins, “And our quick wits.”

Dream scoffs, but he realizes that his shoulders have loosened up while he and Quackity were bickering. The tiredness has crept back in without the firm tension keeping it in check. He blinks hard, looking around. He can hear the other three in the darkness, their voices more than their words.

“I don’t rely on luck,” Dream swallows, mouth dry. “And wit is only helpful when your enemies can understand it. The kinds of creatures that survive in this realm...they don’t have mercy, Quackity. They don’t have compassion. They don’t hesitate. They don’t monologue to give us time to regroup.”

“You have mercy, though.” Quackity points out. “You have compassion. You hesitate. You definitely monologue.”

“I didn’t.” Dream looks down at Nightmare. “Not when I was here, I didn’t.”

The blades he’d had during his time in the Nether hadn’t been quite like his sword. They’d been found, for the most part, on bodies, in rooms in the fortress, dropped by enemies as they’d fought. None had lasted long. He’d had blades break mid-fight, shatter as he stabbed through flesh, crack under the weight of his blow. Nightmare has never failed him. Nightmare, loyal and trusting and his, wouldn’t have judged him for the things he’d done while trapped. Would have appreciated it, even. He knows that Nightmare won’t fail him, and that’s why he can’t bring himself to be calm without it in his hand. Nightmare does not thrive on mercy, compassion, or hesitation. Only action, and being fed so that it can sing.

“Is that what you want to do? You want to be alone so you can go back to that?” Quackity asks, though he doesn’t sound like he’s judging. The lack of condemnation isn’t surprising, but it makes Dream feel marginally better. Still, he can’t bring himself to answer. He doesn’t know *what* to answer. The answer isn’t *yes*. If he could, he’d take them all and leave this place forever without a glance behind him. But the answer isn’t *no*, either, because he can’t do that, and that means that those things, those soft bits of himself that he’s allowed to slowly return after his escape - they can’t stay. He has to put them away again, if he wants the five of them to survive this.

Quackity lets the silence stay this time, not pushing. They find the others only a few minutes later, another door located and the three of them crowded around it and bickering about who gets to go first.

Dream doesn’t say anything to George; he’s not annoyed anymore, but the conversation with Quackity has replaced the irritation with shame. He can’t look at Sapnap, either, knowing he’d find only frustration and disappointment looking back. Instead, he leads them up the stairs and tries not to think about what Quackity had asked. If he thinks on it too much, he knows that an answer will come to him and he is far, far too scared to let himself think of which option he’d settle on.

Time drips forward, slow and inexorable as the lava flowing outside the window. For every agonizing second of it, Karl doesn’t sleep.

He blinks. In that split second, he forgets why he needs to open them again and they stay closed without him noticing for far too long, a weight greater than any other all-nighter he’s ever had keeping his lids down. For a moment, his consciousness slips away and he feels like he’s falling, untethered, within sleeping and waking and utterly conscious of both states of being.

He snaps back to himself with a muffled gasp and a pounding heart and wonders just how close he’d just teetered to the edge.

He can’t sleep. He can’t.

From the moment he'd stepped into the Nether, he's felt it. Inside and out; Karl feels stronger than he's ever felt before in his entire life. Heat zips along his skin and it feels like soft rain on a warm summer day, while Quackity winces every time open air brushes against his skin under Dream's cloak. Karl's feet know where to go, and he hates that he's a passenger in a body that walks with purpose, with strength.

Karl has never walked with strength. He had his confidence and his determination to come out of anything with an advantage. He had his witty mouth to get him in and out of situations. He had his cloak to give him comfort and protection from an ultimately apathetic world. He had his speed to get him out of there when it went too south to talk his way out. But he's never been *strong* like this before. He feels a certainty in his body that he's just...unfamiliar with.

His words are ash in his mouth, twisting to the whims of a birthright he doesn't want. His cloak prickles at his back, threatening rather than protecting, it's magic bristling at the person it's supposed to comfort. His legs are restless, heels thrumming against the brick of the bastion. That itself isn't unusual, and neither is the urge to *go*.

He wonders how much of that is him, and how much of it is something inhuman. How much of it it always was.

Karl wants to feel sick at the thought. He wants to look at his claws and touch his fangs and feel disgusted, horrified, stomach churning in revulsion. He wants to. But ever since he stepped into the Nether, any feeling of disgust has been surface level; far more horrifying is the feeling of rightness, of the certainty that *this is where he is supposed to be*.

It's a hook - barbed, jagged and buried deep in his heart. It tugs him forward, onward and upward, no matter how much he wants to turn around and run and run and run like he always has. He's prey, Karl realises, and the kneejerk terror that overcomes him then is so human that for a second the heat of the Nether hits him full force. He's prey, or at least the part of him that's still human is. *Weak*, he thinks. *Injured*.

A chance.

It's waiting for him to slip up, for him to stumble in his defense of his humanity and take everything from him. There's a fire in his heart, magma in his bones, and very soon it will eat him all up, nerves and tendons and heart and all, and it will settle in his skin and tear the ones he loves to pieces.

He knows this. He feels it.

To sleep would be to give it a moment of weakness he can't afford. So no matter how much Sapnap persuades or begs or cajoles, he won't sleep. He can't be the thing that kills them.

Because it *wants* them. It's all tangled up, the desire and the hurt and the fear and the predator and the prey. They sleep, and he thinks *weak* and he thinks *mine* and he thinks about how some stories described love as a kind of violence. He still thinks that last part is bullshit, which is the only reason he's even still allowing himself to be in the same room as them. Especially after what happened last time he'd let himself sleep.

He hadn't even...realized. He'd just been sleeping, and then he'd been awake, but it had felt like the same thing because all he'd heard in his dreams had been a mouth-watering rhythm and, over even the ambient sounds of the Nether upon waking, a familiar heartbeat, steady and strong, had echoed it.

For that second between *asleep* and *awake*, he hadn't been himself. For that second between *asleep* and *awake*, his mouth had watered and the taste of blood was all he'd craved - to slash and bite and ravage until nothing else remained and he could drink to his heart's content.

Then Sapnap had stirred, and the faintest brush of feathers had made their way over his arm, and he'd blinked his eyes against the dimness of the tent to find his mouth open and his fangs pressing into the delicate hollow of Sapnap's throat, the taste of his heartbeat on Karl's tongue.

He can still taste the blood. Small as it was, barely beading - he can taste it, copper and iron staining his tongue. There's a part of him that still wants more. Craves more.

So he can't sleep, no matter how sweetly Sapnap asks, or how doe-eyed Quackity looks at him, once they settle down in one of the highest floors of the bastion to get some rest before continuing on.

Sapnap had tried, for what had felt to Karl was forever, but he'd eventually given up to go lie down with Quackity. Maybe back home it would have been a playful loss, a pout when Karl got hyperfocused on his enchanting or his potions. Instead, at the end of it, Sapnap was just tired, the tail end of an argument that fizzled out into bitter exhaustion rather than anything productive. Karl avoids Sapnap's eyes and focuses on the sound of the hell outside instead of the absence of his beloveds' arms around him. He wants. He *aches*. In the end, Karl cracks, and watches Sapnap settle down next to a sleeping Quackity, looking for a moment like he might protest and fight sleep, but he's out the second his head hits the meager pillow. Days of heat and exhausting hours of walking and stress work to Karl's advantage.

Dream, sitting far enough away that a stranger walking in on the scene might think he's in a separate group from them, isn't sleeping, either. He sits, Nightmare on the ground next to him, one knee drawn up, head tilted back against the wall. Karl hopes that he manages to get some sort of shut-eye, but he thinks that maybe Dream is feeling as prey-like as Karl feels right now.

Karl watches George, who continues to poke at the small cooking fire they'd put together to make a meal. George collects the last of the food and stands up with the wooden plate, stocking across the eternity between them and Dream to drop it next to him.

"Eat." He says.

"I already ate." Dream protests, head rolling against the wall to look up at George. He'd eaten half a ration, Karl recalls, and even that had been a fight.

"Eat more."

"Save it. Or eat it yourself."

“Dream!” George says sharply, though Karl is familiar enough to hear that there is much to be read in his voice besides annoyance, “Just - sleep or eat. You only get to not do one.”

“...I thought you were mad at me.”

“I *am* mad at you.” George picks up the plate again and roughly shoves it into Dream’s chest, forcing him to grab it lest the diced potatoes roll off and into his lap. “You’re being a dick.”

“I’m just trying -” Dream cuts himself off, huffing with annoyance. Karl watches his face soften, though, as he looks back up at George. “Okay. I’ll eat it. Thank you.”

“Whatever,” George mutters, still sounding frustrated, but he reaches down and caresses Dream’s hair, just once, before stalking back over, making a line straight for Karl.

“Karl,” George begins as soon as he reaches him but Karl, who just watched him strongarm Dream into some sort of self care and has a feeling George is going to attempt to do the same to him, holds up a hand.

“Don’t. Just...Don’t start, George. Please.”

“You’re exhausted,” George counters anyway, “You need sleep.”

“I can’t sleep.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“I can’t *lie* to you, George,” Karl says, uncharacteristically harsh, “I *can*’t.”

Not technically a lie. He can’t, because he refuses to. He’s getting the hang of this.

“Could a potion help? Because otherwise I’m two steps away from knocking you out with your own staff.”

Karl snorts, “I’d like to see you try.”

“Will a potion help?” George presses, until finally Karl shrugs, the uncertainty of truth let out unwillingly.

“Maybe. But if something happens in the night -”

“We can handle it.” George says. “Please, Karl. You have to take care of yourself. If for nothing else, then for them.”

George pauses, and for a moment, the silence that rests between them feels like a suffocating blanket, a pillow pressed to his face.

Then, George says, “You’re breaking their hearts, acting like this.”

All Karl can compare it to is a sinkhole, a void down, down, down into the earth, yawning wide to swallow anyone unlucky enough to be caught in its path. It drags him down with it,

until all that is left to fill up the hole is anger. Hot and red, and all the worse for knowing that it's true.

Karl's head whips up with a snarl, feeling his face drawn back, teeth bare "You think I don't *know* that?" he hisses.

"I think," George says, voice as firm as he can make it, and through the haze of the Nether, he can see George's face flatten out as he hides what he's feeling behind the princely mask of his, "That *you* think sacrificing yourself for their happiness will stop this from hurting. And it won't. Not giving a shit about yourself because you think it's already over only hurts them *more*. We're *going* to save you. Whether you like it or not, but I'd prefer that we don't end up with *more* trauma."

"Because we've been so good at processing it all before," Karl rolls his eyes, just letting himself - speak. It's just George and Dream to hear him, if any of them can handle the truth, it's these two. "Gods, George, I thought you were the sensible one. How can you look at this and think we're all going to make it out of this?"

"Because we will." George insists, "I know you, I know Dream, I know Sapnap, I know Quackity. I know me. This won't break us. It's bad, but it *won't* break us."

Karl admires George's optimism. He really does. It's good that they'll have him to keep their spirits up, when Karl is gone.

It hadn't been...real before. Just a few days ago - and how had it only been so little time? So little time, not enough, *never* enough - he had felt that maybe, he might never be human again. Now he can feel the Nether in every pore, every muscle, every bone, and he *knows* he never will be.

"George..." Karl looks at him, all anger seeping out to make way for exhaustion, "I thought it was bad back in the castle. I was wrong. I was so wrong."

"Hey -" George starts, beginning to scoot closer as Karl's eyes grow wet, "Hey, hey, Karl -"

"I can't sleep," Karl says, holding up his arms to stop George from coming any closer, "I can't sleep, because if I lie next to them I can hear their heartbeats and it makes my teeth *ache*. I can't sleep because if I touch them, I could scratch them. Hurt them."

"You won't -"

"I can't sleep," Karl continues, ignoring him, "Because last time I woke up, all I thought when I saw them was *food*. I didn't recognise Sapnap until my fangs were at his *throat*, so don't - don't you *dare* tell me that I won't hurt them."

"Karl -"

"Don't *Karl* me! You don't know what it's like! You have no idea, you -" He cuts off as next to them, Sapnap stirs, rolling over before settling back into sleep. Quackity shifts to let him

move, accommodating even in sleep, and then clings to him again, face pressed to Sapnap's spine.

"Then tell me," George says, voice quiet, "Because I know for a fact you're not telling them anything."

"I want them to have hope." Karl replies, dully.

"They won't give up on you, Karl." George says, "And neither will I."

Karl sits for a few moments, drawing his claws across the bricks, a repetitive motion. He doesn't know how to tell George that they should. Despair drips down his spine, and he can feel the burn behind his eyes, unrelated to the heat.

"If I..." Karl says, wets his lips, prepares himself, "If I tell you, you have to promise me something."

"That depends," George says easily, "Promise you what?"

Karl's always been a bit of a coward. He's never been afraid to admit that. Out of everything, though, this perhaps might be the most cowardly thing he's done before, but he just...he needs the assurance.

"There's an old story," He says by way of answer, hoping George will go along with him, "About a god."

"Is this the time for a story?"

"He was a god of fire and people feared him." Karl goes on without answering, "He was proud of the fear. He basked in the power he was given by humanity because they were scared of what his fire might do to them. He thought the whole world should revere him and it did, because he was a source of great terror."

Karl lets his eyes fall on Sapnap and Quackity.

"The whole world did. All the world, save one woman. She was a priestess in a small temple who had devoted herself to the proud god. The priestess did not fear him like everyone else, but loved him faithfully and with all of her heart. The god was intrigued, so he went to this priestess and grew to know her. Eventually, he came to love her. She was kind despite worshipping a cruel god such as him and she taught him her ways. She tamed his blazing inferno and used it to fire a hearth, warm and comforting. She loved him, but she loved a lot of other things too. The sunrises and the oceans, the brea of a donkey and the hiss of a snake. The taste of sour berries and the simple pleasures of a sip of water. It was for this love that the god fell for her and, through her, he, too, grew to love the world."

Karl glances at George, checking to see if he's paying attention. George stares back, confused but willing to hear him out. Karl wonders if this tale will be the last story he ever shares, a silly little scribble in a scroll he'd won in a game of chance with an old storyteller on the

road. How could he have known that it would be so important to him one day? Chance, indeed.

“After some time,” he continues, “she became pregnant, and the god learned fear. She was mortal, and to bear a god’s child would surely kill her. He begged his father, the father of all, to grant her the same immortality he bore so that he would not lose his wife. His father refused. Gods and mortals are not the same, his father said, and to bestow on her divinity would be placing an ignited creeper in their midst. Mortals feel more than the gods do, a depth to their love and to their hate that never ends. A mortal with the strength of a god is something to be feared, something that will only bring destruction, no matter how much love they have. They’re too volatile.”

“Okay,” George plays along. “So she died?”

“Of course not,” Karl smiles slightly, “The god disagreed. And he was proud and he had the power to make his own wish come true. As his wife lay in labor, sure to die, he took his own divinity and gave it to his beloved. She lived and bore him a son. For a time, they were happy. In recognition of his former divinity, he was made a king.”

“I don’t know what this has to do with -”

“Give me a minute, George.” Karl’s voice almost cracks and he clears his throat, “Please. I promise, it’ll make sense. Like I said, the whole world save this one priestess feared the proud once-god. Fear breeds hatred, and the once-god had given up his mantle and had become vulnerable. When their son was grown, the spitting image of his father, he was a target for those who sought revenge for some fire or another. One day, the son entered a town... and he did not return.

“The now-king found his son’s body once reports of the death reached him. It was the now-king that returned to his wife, now a goddess, and it was the now-king that stood by and watched as his wife’s wrath and grief burned away any mark of the town where his son died. There was nothing but ash and cinders in the wind. Innocence was guilty by association and every adult and child, human and hybrid and animal, *everything* in the town met the same fate. A fate of ash. It was here that he saw that his own father had been right; that mortals were not made for divinity.

“His wife’s grief was endless. Village to town to city, none were safe from her vengeful search, for some of the killers had escaped. Any place that she thought might shelter them, she would raze to the ground. Gone was the kind priestess that he had saved. This was a wrathful creature, who would not stop until all the world was nothing but scorched earth. A hearth blazing out of control. And so the king knew what he must do. Even though it broke his heart, he went to his wife and he took back his divinity. He held her, then, as she died, mortal once more, and he knew that he had done the right thing, when he saw the relief there.”

“Karl, stop,” George says, holding up a hand, “Storytime is over, okay? Who cares if this fictitious woman got given some strange power and started killing people?”

“Too much power isn’t safe for anyone.” Karl swallows painfully, tongue dry. “Especially not for people like me. The ones that aren’t used to it. We go crazy with it when the time comes. I’ll lose it, if something happens to them, or - or if I do something to them.”

“Karl, you wouldn’t hurt them. You wouldn’t lift a hand to either of them.” George says, conviction plain, “You’d rather die than hurt any of us. You’ve proven that.”

“You’re right,” Karl almost laughs, shaken by the words, “You’re right, George. And that’s why you need to promise me.”

“I what?” George asks, completely thrown off, “What do I need to promise you?”

“I’d rather die than hurt any of you,” Karl says, slow, careful, because if he rushes this then he might break into a million pieces.

“Karl?”

“The others... They wouldn’t understand. You know they won’t. But you understand. The god-king understood. I know you don’t want to be a king, but you were raised as one. You know how to make the hard choices. And the woman, his wife, she was grateful. She didn’t want to die as a monster. *I* don’t want to die as a monster.”

The realisation creeps over George’s face like breath over a grave. His mouth opens and closes, the words stuck in his throat. When he finally speaks, there’s no question in his voice, and it’s colder than midwinter.

“What are you saying.”

“I-I don’t want to hurt them.” Karl says, and it’s taking all his effort, all his focus to keep the tears down, to keep his voice steady so he can make this last, desperate request, even as he can no longer meet George’s eyes “But I won’t be able to stop myself -”

“Stop -”

“- so someone has to *stop me* instead.”

“*No.*”

“George. Please.” Karl begs, and tears spill over and begin to trail down his cheeks, evaporating in the heat of the Nether, wretched and exhausted and utterly anguished, “If this is the last godsdamned thing I get to control in this whole fucking situation -”

“Shut up.” George’s voice is like steel, and gods, he sounds - really angry; angry in a way Karl has never been on the receiving end of before. And still, Karl begs.

“Please. *Please*, George, you have to promise me.”

“I don’t have to do *shit*,” George says, and suddenly he’s moving, seizing Karl by the front of his shirt and hauling him upwards and against the wall. He’s so angry he’s shaking with it, and Karl shakes too, the uneven wall digging into his back and scratching at his skin. “Don’t

ever say that to me. Don't you ever fucking say that to me again. How dare you ask that of me? *How dare you?*”

Karl just sobs, broken and hopeless, and completely unwilling to fight back, “Please. Please, George.”

“We didn't come here just so you can *give up*.” He snarls, and drops Karl. He slumps back against the wall as George leans over him, “How *dare* you do that to them? To us? You aren't going to die, either by this fucking Empress' hand, or by mine. So don't you fucking dare mention that. You won't hurt us. You *won't*. We're getting out of here and then we're going the fuck *home*.”

Karl ends up slumped back against the wall, all the fight draining out of him as George rants above him.

“Home,” He echoes blankly. “I don't even know what that means, anymore.”

“It's where you *belong*, you fucking fool,” George shoves a finger into his forehead sharply. “You know exactly what it means, you just need to *think* about it more instead of wallowing in your little misery cave. Prime's sake.”

“I'm sorry,” Karl says uselessly, roughly brushing at his eyes. “George, I just - I can't -”

“Enough.” George cuts him off, flopping back down on the ground next to him and pulling his knees up. “Shut up and lean against me.”

“*What?*”

“You heard me.”

“George, I could hurt -”

George grabs his arm and yanks and Karl flails as he falls into George's side.

“Shut up! Shut up, no one has any more right to speak in this party! You're all idiots. The Nether has smoked your brains into little burnt peas and I'm the only one left with cells enough to think. Now lean against me and rest.”

“I can't sleep -”

“I said *rest!*” George snaps. “Don't sleep, but you're closing your stupid eyes and you're resting your stupid mouth and you're getting some shut-eye or so *help* me, I will *beat you unconscious* -”

“Okay!” Karl puts his hands up, admitting defeat, “Okay, okay! If I hurt you, it's - well, it's my fault, but it'll be a bit your fault, too.”

George just glowers at him until Karl gives up and leans against him. His head rests on George's shoulder and he breathes in slowly for seven seconds, out for eleven as he lets his eyes close.

He's out before he reaches nine.

Karl wakes up to agonized wailing.

His first thought is that it's George, though he can't remember why it would be George -

And then there's the pain. In a breath, in a heartbeat, it's all he knows. A fire is lacing through him, barbed wire pressing up against his back, like he fell asleep on a bed of razor blades. But he hadn't, had he? Hadn't he fallen asleep with his lovers in his arms, with warm blankets and the scent of home surrounding them? Hadn't everything that had come after been just a nightmare, one made of red brick and blood and salt?

It isn't a nightmare, as hands skate across his skin and pin him to reality. He knows it isn't because it wouldn't hurt so much if it was.

He isn't so much aware of where it hurts, only that it is all-powerful, all consuming. Only that it is him, and he is it, and there is nothing he wouldn't do to stop the pain. He isn't even sure that he has a name, not anymore; it hurts too much for names. It burns, fire brimming under his skin. The pain comes in waves, oceans and oceans of it, like standing in saltwater in the middle of a storm; no matter where you run, you're going to get wet.

Agony abates, then pulses again, and he feels the heart of it, pushing up at his back. He chokes, gagging on the tang of iron in his mouth as he bites his tongue.

"Karl? Karl!"

Is that his name? It has to be; something in that voice calls safe, calls love, calls home. That voice knows him and he knows its owner in every way.

The wave of pain hits him again, bright and blinding and copper *floods* his mouth, his hand suddenly between his teeth. No matter what, he doesn't want the voice to hear how much it hurts.

The sharpness of the pain in his hand brings him some clarity - it's familiar pain, not this strange immolation that threatens to swallow him whole. It gives him a chance to gasp, to open his eyes to red brick and someone's knees - Quackity, it smells like Quackity. There's tears in Quackity's trousers and a dark stain slowly soaking into them from the rips in fabric and skin. There's drops of blood on the tips of his fingers. He knows they aren't his.

"No, no, darlin', don't hurt yourself -" Sapnap, firmly tugging the injured hand out of his mouth. His fangs scrape against the skin.

"What's happening?" George asks, and it's sharp, demanding, "What the hell is going on?"

"There's something -" Quackity starts but Karl doesn't hear the rest because something *snaps*, deep in his bones and in his soul, breaks and stretches and strains against the confines of his body, against the bounds of his skin.

The pain consolidates with his clarity, and he wishes it didn't. Revulsion crawls up his throat, chokes him with disgust as he swallows blood and tries desperately to wish that this wasn't happening. He holds onto Quackity and Sapnap's hands and doesn't fight against the tears streaming down his cheeks.

Because he can feel them now. The agony is actualized to his back, to his shoulder blades that had ached with what he thought had been just the weight of their supplies. He knows the truth now, as something underneath his skin *moves*.

It's sharp and hard and insistent, and it pushes up against his skin, inside his skin, stretching his muscles and his endurance to the limit.

He thinks he screams. He isn't entirely sure. There is blood in his mouth and it gags him, or maybe the way his body tenses and twists under the onslaught stops any noise escaping. Maybe he's just stuck in a nightmare, and his mind won't let him scream.

"Fuck, we read about this, fucking *fuck*,"

"Get his shirt off," Dream says, distant, and Karl retches. He can't, he can't let them see - illogical, but it's the only thought in his panicked and pained mind.

"No!" Karl shrieks, "No, no, no -"

"Karl, shh," Quackity soothes, "Karl, Karl, we've got you, you're okay," He presses a kiss to the back of Karl's hand that Karl feels rather than sees, before his face swims into view through the haze of pain, "Hey. Hey, it's me. It's us. Can you feel Sapnap?"

There's a warmth pressed to the base of his spine, and he *aches* for it, aches for the days where Sapnap's hand on his skin was normal, was home, rather than something he had deprived himself of.

It's that thought that almost breaks him. That of home - of pale sheets and potion stands and the smell of rich earth. He'd resigned himself to the thought that he'll never see it again, but he hadn't grieved for it, not yet. Whatever is happening to him now is irreversible, immutable. He could cut claws, he could file teeth, fuck, even the eyes he could deal with, maybe. This; the inevitable change, the surety of it, forcing the reality of his non-humanhood home, a change that will be unable to be ignored. No matter what, he can never go back from this. The truth of it punches low into his gut, and it's only the fire under his skin that snaps him from the raw open wound of his self-pity.

"It *hurts*, Q," Karl says, and he doesn't know which part of him he's talking about.

"I know." Quackity says, his voice cracking, heart breaking, "I know, I'm sorry. Can we take your shirt off? So we can help?"

Karl bites into his lip so hard he draws blood, squeezing his eyes shut as another wave of pain racks his body. He nods.

"We'll take it slow," Sapnap promises, "Alright?"

Karl makes an affirming noise in response, and his grip on Quackity's hand tightens.

It takes all three of the others to remove Karl's shirt; between him writhing in pain, the ratcheting up of the sensitivity of the skin on his back, and the claws about to tear the whole thing to shreds anyway, it's a struggle.

By the end of it, Karl is panting, face buried in Quackity's lap as he tries, fruitlessly, to comfort him. He can feel Quackity's hands in his hair, but he can barely even speak, barely even draw breath to breathe through the pain.

"You read about this, right?" Sapnap asks, desperation in his voice. Karl hears footsteps, heavy, cautious. Dream.

"Yeah," George replies, swallowing harshly, clearly rummaging for something in the background, "Yeah, we did."

"Can you fix it?" Quackity demands, and Karl sobs as he feels the movements under his skin - movements, because it undulates and pulsates in two separate movements, there's two of the fuckers redefining what skin can do on his back. There's no fixing this.

"Only riding it out," Dream says, grimly. There's a familiar clink, glass against glass and liquid sloshing.

"Potions?" Quackity asks what Karl is thinking, panicked, "What do you need potions for?"

No, Karl wants to say. No, because this is inevitable and they only have the bare bones of what his guild left behind. No, because nothing is going to fix this and they need to save what they have.

He wants to tell them, he wants, he wants, *he wants*, but the world no longer cares for what he wants.

The pain *flares*. Anything that came before was nothing in the face of this. An inferno would be a kinder way to die.

A conflagration under his skin, twisting and curling all the muscles under his skin, burning them all away; only it can't be a fire, because at least then the nerves would be gone, and there would be some relief. There was no relief here.

Karl *screams*.

He no longer has control of himself, of his voice, of his own pain. His back arches and his claws dig in and each of his limbs in turn tense and stiffen and *twist*, even as the muscles inside feel like they shrivel and char. He is no longer aware of how Sapnap tries to cushion him against the hard stone of the bastion, how Quackity holds him as close as he can even as those razor sharp claws carve arcs in the air.

There's a snap, a rip, two blinding points of pain on his back. Warmth, wetness, pouring down his skin. Karl chokes on the blood in his mouth as he bites cleanly through his lip.

Hands, gentle, tilting his head upwards, washing out the blood. Voices, terrified. A throat too hoarse to scream.

Something creaking, cracking beyond his field of view. It is heavy, weighing him down, and he slumps sideways. The whole room is spinning, Quackity's face above him is going grey, the whole world washed out. More wet, thick blood, he can smell it almost overwhelming him in the air, and he can feel it spreading, more than he can afford to lose. Good. Let it take him, and rid the others of this. He just hopes he can still see Quackity's face, Sapnap's face right up until the end.

Something cool and solid is shoved between his lips. His teeth clink against glass. Something fizzes in his mouth, the familiar tang of a healing potion.

He wants to fight them, because they only have so many and he doesn't *want* them in the face of this agony and its close end, but he doesn't even have enough strength to close his eyes. He doesn't have the ability to fend off their aid.

Belatedly, he realises that the pain has stopped. It's still there, lapping at his shoulder blades and needling up the skin of his back, but he is no longer consumed by it. It fades, with every swallow of the healing potion.

"Karl?" Someone says - Quackity. "Karl, can you hear us?"

"He's still bleeding," Sapnap says, voice full of worry, "Give him another one."

"N -" Karl tries to say, but his throat is red raw from screaming, and Quackity tilts his head back and he feels the bitterness of another healing potion burn his throat.

"It's okay, it's okay, it's over now," Quackity says, which just makes tears prick at the corners of Karl's eyes. It's not over. There's a weight on his shoulders that wasn't there before, his teeth seem even sharper, "You're okay, Karl."

Karl doesn't have the strength to respond, and instead just replies with a weak sob.

Sapnap is there a second later, "Karl? Does it still hurt? Most of the bleeding has stopped. We have another healing pot, just in case; we don't know if there was any internal damage. You don't have to say anything," A warm hand in his own, familiar grooves, "Just squeeze my hand once for yes, twice for no."

He doesn't know if he can lie non-verbally; he doesn't know if he has anything left in him to try.

Still, for the sake of their potion stock, he tries. He squeezes once, but his hand won't let him squeeze twice. He is stuck bending to the truth of the universe.

"I don' wan' ..." He tries, the words slurred and stumbling as he tries to bring Sapnap into focus, trying to make them see, "Don' *need*."

"Please," Quackity says, "We can take the supply hit. We just don't want to see you in pain, Karl."

“Please,” Sapnap echoes, “For us.”

He can't argue with that. This time, he is able to drink it himself with Quackity's help, and Dream comes round to his other side to brace him as he sits up.

Something drags at his shoulders. The muscles ache, the skin red and raw and newly healed, and it pulls at them like one pulls at stitches. He doesn't want to look.

Still scratchy, but with more strength now, he speaks, “What...what happened?”

George and Dream exchange looks. Quackity's eyes are solely focused on Karl, and so are Sapnap's, save for the few moments where his eyes flick up, and behind him.

He doesn't want to look, but Karl has always been curious. So, with Sapnap and Quackity's hand in his, he turns his head.

Stretching out from his back, bleached white save for the blood still speckled, are bones. Thick and twisted, still working out how to exist, they crack and flex in response to his panic, hairline fractures making their way up to the tips. The ends are sharp and jagged, the most bloody; what must have been used to cut their way out of him. In the low crimson light, they look like they were supposed to be wings, albeit bastardized and rotted away to nothing but a skeleton.

“Please...” Karl says, watching them twitch, partially with his intent, partially on their own, “Please tell me this is a nightmare. Tell me I'm just seeing things.”

There's a heavy silence, and then Dream says, softly, “I'm sorry.”

“No,” Karl says, low, “*No*.”

“We don't care,” Sapnap rushes to say, “We don't give a fuck if you have wings, we can still _”

“It's the last thing, isn't it?” Karl asks, already knowing the answer, “Before I -”

“Shut up,” Quackity says, and surprisingly, so does George. There's a look in his eyes that's burning fiercer than the fires outside of the bastion, and Karl looks away as Quackity continues, “So what? With bone wings or without, you're Karl and we love you, and we aren't going to let this take you. Right?”

He doesn't sound like he's going to take no for an answer.

“That might not be something you can control,” Karl says, weakly.

“I don't care.” Quackity says, “We're so close to fixing this for good. We're going to make it.”

Karl sighs, “When did you become the optimist, Q?”

“When the resident optimist quit his job,” Quackity responds, voice bleakly joking. He reaches out, carefully stroking Karl’s cheek. His hands are trembling. Karl wants to reach up and hold his wrists but his body is too weak, even after all the potions.

“Sorry,” he says, because it’s all he can say. Maybe he could have continued trying to put on a brave face, look on the bright side - but most of the time, when he said that things will work out, he was just lying. Faking it until he made it. Karl is a realist, at his core, but that had never been what he’d wanted to put out into the world. He’d *wanted* to be an optimist, so he’d just - acted like one. He can’t act now. He can’t see how this works out. It’s all darkness. There are no words to say, even if his true nature would let him say them.

“Don’t apologize. It’s our turn to see the light at the end of the tunnel, huh?” Sapnap carefully ruffles Karl’s hair and Karl leans into the touch, feeling like a flower beneath the sun. He craves the kind touch after so much pain. He wants to be held and soothed and loved. He can’t let himself be any of those things.

“How many potions do we have left?” he asks, carefully turning his face to Dream.

“Enough.” Dream says, which isn’t a good sign.

“Tell me,” Karl demands. “I didn’t check before we left. How many do we have left?”

Dream sighs, but he looks back into the chest. Karl sees his lips move as he counts.

“Eleven,” He says after a half-second. “We have eleven left.”

“How many healing?”

“Two.” Dream admits, exchanging a glance with Quackity.

Karl squeezes his eyes shut. Two left. Fuck. *Fuck*.

“I’m -” He starts to say, but Sapnap cuts him off by clearing his throat.

“No apologies. You had two big ass bone spurs coming out of your back. You needed them.”

“We still have plenty of offensive stuff,” Dream says, looking back into the chest, “Lots of slowness, a few harming, even. We don’t need that many healing potions, not if we play it safe.”

Karl curls in on himself, covering his face with his hands. Dream is just trying to make him feel better but Karl doesn’t know if he can even process it. The world feels like it’s ending. Like it’s all just falling apart around him, shards at his feet that he keeps stepping on and shattering into dust.

He feels cautious arms wrap around him, careful of his new bone appendages, and Karl knows it’s selfish, has been fighting back the urge to cling to them for what feels like centuries now, but he can’t do it this time. He throws himself into Sapnap’s chest, hiding his face in Sapnap’s shoulder and sniffing pathetically.

It's the last change. Next to go will be his - his personhood. He'll forget them, forget himself, forget his humanity. He'll become a soldier for the Empress. Another member of her army of reclaimed magic.

He holds tighter to Sapnap. Karl hopes that, when the time comes, he'll have the strength to let go before his grasping hands seek pain instead of comfort.

They part, eventually, Karl still sniffing, when Quackity gently urges them up.

"We're nearly to the top," He says, practically begging, "Just hold out for a little bit longer, Karl."

"I'll try." Karl says, and he's able to say it so he knows it isn't a lie. He hopes it isn't.

They hadn't bothered bringing much out to camp with; just a few plates and pillows. They scrape the plates, pack the pillows, and then they're off.

As Quackity had pointed out, they're nearly to the top. They find no more bodies as they travel, and the Bastion stays silent except for the noises of their passage through. Sapnap carries Karl for most of it, draped across his back, because he's too weak to walk. From Sapnap's back, Karl and the lantern guide them through the halls, up more stairs, until finally, there is a ladder.

Dream goes first, at his own insistence; the opening at the top of the ladder leads out into the hazy red sky of the Nether. Dream slowly peeks his head through, turning as he scans whatever is above them. He looks down, eyes shadowed from the darkness that clings to the ceiling, nearly twenty feet above them.

"There's a portal," he says.

Karl swallows, his heart thundering in his chest hard enough to hurt.

Home, his heart whispers. He reaches for the ladder. He's got enough strength to go home.

Walking through the portal feels like stepping through an open doorway. There's no force against him like with the End portal, and no shift in the atmosphere like the birch forest portal. It's just a step through purple air, and suddenly he's in a different place. It's like a pressure that had been holding him flat to the ground releases all at once; he's *home*. He can breathe and his lungs expand. The itch is scratched and it's satisfying enough that he could cry.

George and Quackity must not feel the same. George's legs give out and, if not for Dream's catch-all instinct, he would have hit the ground. Instead, he clings to Dream, body limp and jelly-like for long seconds until he can gather his strength again.

Quackity isn't much better off. He keeps his feet under him but he holds tight to Sapnap's arm, knees wobbly and face pinched.

"That bad?" Karl asks worriedly.

“It’s fine,” Quackity waves him off, slowly letting go of Sapnap’s arm and standing on his own.

“It’s just heavy,” George agrees, voice weak, using Dream’s hands to support himself, “We’ll get used to it.”

Karl reluctantly turns from them to take in their new surroundings and he can’t help but blanch at what he sees.

There are people, first of all. People like him; with big, bony protrusions from their backs, pale eyes and fangs far more developed than his in some cases, or just barely malforming the lips in others. People not like him at all, who look stressed and beaten up but not *turning*. He sees humans and hybrids of all genders and sizes; clumped into small groups or standing alone. No groups, though, are as large as their party; he sees mostly trios and duos, but the vast majority seem to be solos. Everyone is watching each other with distrust, keeping a careful distance. A few turn to look at them as they emerge but, for the most part, look away without much fuss. Amongst the strays and the humans, there are those that are clearly no longer part of the Overworld. They shine, somehow, against the darkness of the world around them. When they walk, it’s like the world resonates with them. Karl looks closer - they’re not walking. They’re floating, just like XD used to do, with the same gravity defying robes. The same inhuman, cosmic air. They must be from her Court directly. The ones that accepted their place. Vex.

Karl watches as one of them drifts close to a stray sitting alone. They pull their hood down and there is a brief moment where something is said, though Karl is too far away to hear it. The stray frowns, their face disconcerted and troubled. Then the Vex reaches up to their face, a brief movement, and when they pull it away, there is white porcelain in their hand. Without their mask, the stray’s face lights up in recognition, their surprise and relief as they jump to embrace the Court member. Though the Vex hugs the stray back, it’s distant. Detached, almost, from the tightness and relief that the stray holds them with.

Recognition, but no ardent affection behind it.

“Wow,” George says and Karl’s eyes are drawn away from the other strays, to the Court in front of them. Where the End was glistening obsidian, the Inbetween is stark, brilliant white, quartz bricks and pillars reaching up into the smokey sky. They’re in a courtyard surrounded by towering walls; in the center of the courtyard is a giant, bloomed blossom tree planted within a pool of reflective water that reminds Karl of the void around the Queen of the End’s throne.

Objectively, this place is beautiful, almost blinding in its purity. There’s something in his core, tugging him forward and onward, deeper inside, a desire to see - something inside.

Subjectively, it sends shivers down his spine. He pulls his cloak - bright and colorful and patchworked and everything that is opposite about either Court - tighter around himself.

“Do we...go in?” Sapnap asks.

“No one else is.” Dream says, “They’re all...waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“We’ll have to ask.” Quackity reasons and starts off for the crowd. Karl drifts after him, scanning the crowd for a friendly face, or at least a non-hostile one.

He counts upwards of fifty people, with the majority in similar states of change to himself, though some are less...changed than him. He makes eye contact with a few people but is quickly rebuffed with sneers or, in one case, an outright snap of fangs and a pulse of red veins that has Quackity quickly changing direction.

It isn’t until they’re well into the crowd and Karl is giving up hope, that someone finds them.

“You guys just arrived?” Says a voice to the side of him, close enough that he almost jumps before steadying himself by grabbing onto Quackity’s hand. It halts his search, gives him someone to maybe glean some information out of. Karl turns to place the words to a face.

“Oh, wow. Just in time, I think.” Says a man with dark brown hair and glasses. He stands near to them, arms open apologetically. He’s one of the most human-looking of the crowd; only his eyes are pale and his teeth have barely sharpened, a nervous but polite smile on his face.

“Sorry,” He says, “Didn’t mean to scare you. I’ve been trying to get to know people, but everyone’s a bit...jumpy, ha,” He laughs awkwardly, too high, “I’m Orion.”

“Karl.” Karl says, giving Orion a quick once-over to assess the threat. Tall, skinny, weak arms, hands soft. His physique gives him an advantage but Karl knows he could take him with his claws alone, if it came down to it. Karl motions to the others, fixing a polite smile that doesn’t flash his fangs on his face. “And this is my family.”

Orion’s eyes flicker to behind Karl; first to the bones on his back, then to the people surrounding him; to Sapanp, shoulders set defensively, and Dream, who Karl can feel the anxiety pulsing off of in waves. Orion skips over George and Quackity, not recognizing them as threats.

“Nice to meet some people who aren’t lost in the sauce,” Orion laughs again, still nervously high-pitched. “Most people threaten to bite me when I say hi.”

“We’re a friendly bunch,” Karl shrugs. “We’re not sure what’s going on, really. Do you know anything?”

“A little,” Orion nods, “For one, you’re in the Court of the Inbetween. Welcome to the home of the Vex. Judging from how prepared you guys look, you’ll fit right in.”

“Well, I’m certainly vexed,” Karl smiles wanly. “Though I don’t think it’s in the way they’re wanting.”

Orion laughs, relatively relaxed for their current predicament. He hooks a thumb over his shoulder and says, “My friends and me, we’ve been around for a while. Wanna join us? Maybe we can answer some questions.”

“Sure,” Karl says without letting Dream or Sapnap make the call. He knows what they’d both pick and he needs answers more than he needs caution right now. He feels Quackity grip his hand tighter and he squeezes back in silent response.

Orion brightens.

“Awesome! Come on,” He motions, “There’s a spot that’s a bit more out of the crowds. Better for talking.”

It’s only a short walk to a small alcove, off to the side of the main courtyard. If there was a sun in this dimension, this place would be shaded. True to Orion’s word, it’s a lot quieter here, though neither Sapnap nor Dream relax. It’s not completely empty; two identical faces blink up at them. It’s a set of piglin hybrids. One has a sharper slant to his expression and he eyes them warily with pale, pupil-free orbs as the bones on his back spike up and outwards. Something twists in Karl’s stomach as he watches the display. They’re both young. Too young for this. They don’t even look out of their teens.

“Hamilton, Gee, this is Karl,” Orion says, “He and his friends just arrived. Sit, guys, please. We might be waiting a while. This is Hamilton and his brother, Gee.”

“What are we waiting for, exactly?” Karl asks, sitting cross legged on the ground. Quackity and George join him, but both Dream and Sapnap choose to stay standing guard behind them. Karl doesn’t think that even George doing his best sweet talk could get Dream to relax right now. At least they’ve sheathed the netherite swords, for the moment.

“Who else?” Orion chuckles, leaning back on his hands. “The Empress.”

“Long queue,” George remarks casually, looking over his shoulder at the milling crowd.

The piglin named Gee, no signs of transformation on him at all, shakes his head. When he speaks, his voice is rough and raspy, though he doesn’t look to be in pain. “She’ll address us all at once. That’s what I heard from Parker, and he’s been here *ages*. He showed up just after the last group left.” His fingers play anxiously with a green handkerchief around his neck.

“How long have you guys been waiting?” Quackity asks.

Orion shrugs, “Difficult to tell. Time passes...weird, here. Maybe a week, for me?”

“Couple of weeks,” The grumpier piglin, Hamilton, huffs, “But it’ll be soon. It’ll have to be.”

“What makes you say that?” Sapnap asks, voice sharp.

“Bein’ here.” Hamilton shrugs, “She don’t want us all turning feral, I’ll bet. The transformation’s practically dead in the water, but it’s still happenin’. I’ve been lucky, but I saw one guy lose it a few days ago and the husks put him down like a dog.”

“Husks?” Karl swallows, exchanging a glance with George.

“Those,” Hamilton points and Karl follows the line of his finger. The places where shadow reigns over the light are few and far between, but where they do exist, Karl realizes they are

filled. He has to focus his eyes to make them out in the shadows, but he sees them eventually - humanoid, completely still and blending into the darkness except for the pale gray of their skin.

“What the *fuck* are those?” Quackity demands.

“Foot soldiers,” Gee rasps. “They take care of things. They’ve been bringing us food and stuff, and deal with problems like when that last stray went feral, but otherwise they just...sit there in the dark until one of the Vex orders them around.”

“Oh,” Karl says faintly. “Neat.”

“So they’re guards.” Dream drops his voice. “But why?”

“Keep us placid, maybe.” Orion shrugs. “You guys probably got here just in time, if I had to guess, though.”

Karl feels the weight of Orion’s gaze on him, then on the appendages on his back.

“What does she want us to do?” He muses aloud, voice thoughtful.

“Stay?” Sapnap shrugs, “Isn’t that her whole thing? She wants everyone to stick around?”

“Fuck that,” Gee snorts, “This place is boring as hell, dude. We’re gonna fix this and head back.”

Despite Hamilton still sitting ramrod straight against the wall, Gee leans against him, slouching in a way that only teenagers can in circumstances such as these.

Orion hums, “Might be fun to stay. Who knows. I haven’t exactly got anyone waiting for me. No one to help me figure it out. At least Vex get a kick-ass deal.”

“How did you?” Karl asks, “Figure it out, I mean.”

“I didn’t know anything about all this until this happened, and even then I was in the dark. My university kicked me out, and so I just...walked. Found a portal. Walked some more. Found another portal. I got here, and someone filled me in on what the hell was happening to me.”

“Yeah,” Karl replies, “Yeah, it...it’s a shock, isn’t it?”

“I think the wings look cool,” Gee says, frowning, “People won’t fuck with us as much with the wings. I hope you keep them.”

“They’re wings?” Quackity asks, sounding vaguely horrified. Dream’s cloak shifts along his back and Karl knows he’s tucking his own wings tighter to his back.

“Can’t think of anything else they might be,” Gee says.

“No matter what they are, they hurt like hell,” Hamilton adds, and there’s a moment of understanding between him and Karl, a quiet shared agony. Karl wonders how many healing potions this kid had had access to, if he had any at all.

Karl is the one that drops the gaze first. His eyes wander to the rest of the crowd, the people milling around, a perpetual state of waiting. He wonders how many of them want to stay. How many of them want to leave.

“How many people didn’t make it?” Karl asks, softly, more to himself than anything else.

“We made it,” Quackity says, nudging his shoulders, “That’s what matters.”

“Listen to your friend,” Hamilton offers, “You gotta look out for yourselves here.”

“Hey!” Gee says, with an indignancy that comes from an oft repeated joke, “What about me?”

“You look like me, we’re basically the same person.” Hamilton says, “I look out for me, and I look after you at the same time.”

Gee groans, “Four minutes. You’re older by *four minutes*.”

Karl subsides, listening to them bicker as he carefully leans back against Sapnap’s legs, instinct more than anything helping him shift the - wings? - bones out of the way. They lay limply against his back, misshapen, and he lets them, tilting his head back against Sapnap’s thigh and letting his eyes close. Whatever happens from here, at least the *itch* is gone. He’s home, for all the good it’s going to do him in the long run.

They spend the next few hours with Orion and the twins, exchanging stories and tidbits of information.

The twins hail from the Badlands, so Karl paints a picture of Pandora for them with his words, taking solace in being able to indulge in his favorite pastime. Orion had been going to school in Snowchester and he and Quackity quickly end up in deep conversation about the higher education systems of the northern country.

It’s not relaxing. Karl doesn’t let his guard down once, but it’s a rest from the constant movement and constant panic, and he has assurance that the transformation, at least, has been slowed.

Still, Hamilton proves to be correct - they came just in time.

Mere hours after their arrival, just when George is beginning to tip against Karl with heavy eyes, there’s a *shift*. Karl feels her in his veins in a way he’s never felt anyone before. His blood thrums, his mouth waters. He feels his eyes dilate.

Around him, Orion and Hamilton have the same reaction, heads snapping to face the crowd.

“What?” Sapnap demands, on his feet in seconds from the stiff seat he’d allowed himself to take only a while back.

Karl can’t answer. He glides to his feet, stepping around a sleepily bewildered George to make his way out of the alcove.

There’s a swell of noise but Karl knows that it comes from guests; not the ones like him, the ones who *feel* her. Bags shuffle, voices whisper, but Karl ignores it all, and the sounds of his friends behind him. He has to stand on his tiptoes to try and get a look, but he knows exactly where she is without sight. He knows in the same way that he knows how to breathe - instinct.

He finds her, the Empress, and if coming through the portal was like scratching the itch, then actually seeing her is incandescent rejuvenation.

Karl pushes through the crowd, whispered curses following him. Someone catches the back of his shirt just as he pushes into a small space in the center of the crowd, a handful of separate groups all leaving a gap between each other that Karl has no shame in taking if it allows him a better view.

The Empress of the Nether, the Inbetween, the Vex stands above them, looking down at the crowd from the top of the wall. Her hair, in contrast to Kristin’s void-black locks, resembles fire, flickering and shifting like flames. Her eyes pierce, coals burning cherry red as they skate across them. For a split second, Karl feels in his bones that she lingers on him, and then shifts slightly to the right. Karl glances, finds Dream at his side, staring back at her just as fiercely. He sees the way Dream’s tense shoulders drop when she turns her gaze from him.

“My children.” The Empress says, her voice seeming to echo despite the openness of the courtyard and the fact that she doesn’t raise her voice at all.

“Empress,” Karl says in response. It’s breathless, utterly awed. The word is raised like a rallying cry from the strays around him, a thread that unites them all in their desire for her.

A hand finds his, squeezing so hard that it shifts the bones, makes Karl wince and look away from her. Quackity holds on tight with both of his hands, staring not at the Empress, but at Karl.

“Come back to us,” Quackity whispers, so low that Karl can barely hear him despite the lack of distance between them. His eyes are desperate as they meet Karl’s. “Karl, come back.”

Karl frowns. Come back? Come back to *where*? He’s home. He’s already back.

“Welcome home,” the Empress says. Karl reluctantly drags his eyes from Quackity back to her, and the sight of her puts him back at ease.

“I’m so glad you all made it.” She folds her hands, presses them to her chest. “Let us take a moment to mourn for your siblings that were unable to come home. Their magic has found its way back to us and their hearts have returned to me.”

She bows her head and Karl can't help but admire the way her fiery hair moves with her, the fall of embers to her shoulders as she lifts her head from her prayer.

"Congratulations." She continues after a brief moment, "Though many of you were initially deemed unsatisfactory, your fortitude and drive proved the magic that gave you life right. Your desire for a better life, a stronger life, has led you here. Back home to me."

She smiles, pleased - it feels like the sort of smile that one has to earn. It means more, from a stern parent, after all. She does not hand her smiles out, Karl knows. This one is a reward for them for their grit. They've all pleased her.

Karl suddenly and fiercely hates all of the strays around him. He wants to be the one she looks at, the one she dotes on and adores. He is better, smarter than any of these other strays. He knows that if he just has the chance, he can prove it.

A hand comes down on his shoulder and Karl snaps to glare, only to be met by worried brown eyes watching him with puppy-dog wideness.

"Come on, darlin'," Sappnap cups his cheek, "Just like on the boat. Come back."

Karl's brows furrow. He understands the words but he can't figure out what they *mean*. Come back where? He's home. He's exactly where he belongs, with his Empress, and his fiances, and George and Dream. He's *already* back.

"Many of you have waited for quite a while, but I'm glad to say that your wait is over. It's time for you to take the next step to earn your place and claim the ultimate prize. Your heart's deepest desire."

Yes, Karl thinks, *yes, yes, for her*.

"Dream," George says, behind them, sharp, insistent, "*Dream*. Look at me."

"I..." Dream says breathlessly, "It's *her*. I can't -"

"Yes, you can," George says, "*Look at me*."

Next to Karl, Dream inhales sharply.

"George, it's like she's...a magnet. I couldn't - Karl. *Karl*."

"What?" Karl hisses, almost a snarl, but he's faced with Dream's stubborn stare when he turns to glare at him.

"Get a hold of yourself," Dream nudges him sharply. "It's her. She's compelling us."

No, she isn't, Karl tries to say, but the words won't form. He tries again, frustration rising, but he can't make himself say it.

Because it's a lie, he realizes.

Like a full cup of ice water is being poured down his skin, Karl shakes the compulsion off. Quackity's painful hold on his hand, Sapnap's hand on his shoulder, they don't feel distant anymore; he shakes his head slowly, and then again with more energy, literally shaking the webs out of his mind.

"Fuck," He says, "*Fuck*."

"You're here?" Quackity asks, small.

"I'm here," Karl confirms, taking a moment to lean his forehead against Quackity's. Sapnap joins them, in a brief moment of serenity.

"We can *do that*?" He pulls away from them to ask, dropping his voice, though he doesn't let either of them go..

"She can," George *tsks*, "Annoying."

"That's a word for it," Quackity looks around, "Other people are starting to notice."

Karl glances around, sees some people shaking themselves out, others still staring at the Empress with glazed, besotted faces. Most of those who had broken free were with others; most of those still staring were standing alone.

"All of you have proven yourselves worthy of being here, in the Court of the Inbetween. Now, you stand before me, your Empress, prepared to show me that you are worthy of staying. My Court has room for only so many, and my magic was generous in who it saved from the clutches of the void. This final trial will bring out the truth in each of you." She sweeps her eyes over the crowd again and, like a wave, a quake goes through them, murmurs and whispers.

"Who will stand before me, in the end?" she asks. Even despite knowing that she's compelling many of them, Karl still feels the echoing whisper of the monster inside of him saying *me, it's me, pick me*. Now he can distinguish it, the compulsion feels obvious; a hook, straight into his heart, a fish on a line, the pull of a riptide.

"I will accept only the best," She continues, almost admonishing, "And I have been most disappointed up to this point. Not one of my children has shown me that it was more than luck that brought them to this Court. Will one of you be the first?"

"*Yes*," Someone shouts from the crowd.

"I will!" Another person yells, and there is a short burst of cries as others claim the same.

Karl swallows back his own shout. He holds Quackity's hand tight.

"Why do I feel like we're about to be sent on a suicide mission?" He asks aloud.

None of the others respond.

“The first to complete my final trial,” The Empress speaks and, though she does not raise her voice, she easily drowns out the cries until there is silence again. “Will receive their heart’s ultimate desire. Good luck.”

The Empress turns her back to them, but there’s a disturbance in the crowd somewhere to Karl’s right that gives her pause.

“*Wait!*” Someone shouts, “Wait, Your Majesty! Your Majesty, a simple inquiry!”

Karl realizes that the voice is familiar. Soon, a known face pops up from the crowd, balancing on someone’s shoulders - and not doing a very good job of it.

Orion waves his arms, trying to catch the Empress’ attention, as he precariously wobbles atop someone - perhaps one of the twins’. He yells to be heard; “Your Majesty! A question!”

At first, Karl thinks the Empress is going to ignore Orion and send them all on their way to the trial. Instead, though, after a long few seconds, the Empress turns back to face them. Her eyes, glowing red coals, find Orion and his arms freeze mid-wave.

“An inquiry.” She says. “Speak it.”

“Can we,” Orion says, voice suddenly weak under her attention. “Um. T-Teams?”

“Teams?” She repeats.

“Can we form teams?” Orion tries again, more power in his voice this time.

The Empress frowns.

“No. The trial is to prove your own worthiness.” She says without elaboration.

Orion wilts. Karl feels panic well up in his gut as he exchanges a wide-eyed look with Sappnap. Do his friends count as a team? What happens to them, in this trial, if they aren’t meant to prove their own worthiness?

His mind races as he looks at the four of them, and then he shoves at Dream as a stupid idea starts to form.

“Shoulders,” He demands.

“What?” Dream winces as Karl yanks him until he’s nearly bent over, “*Ow*, Karl, what the fuck -”

“Get me on your fucking shoulders, for Prime’s sake,” Karl tugs again, touch desperate, “I need to -”

“Okay, okay,” Sappnap gets with the program and then George is pushing Dream to his knees with force while Sappnap is lifting Karl and Dream is giving in with an annoyed huff of effort. Karl ends up on Dream’s shoulders and, when Dream stands up straight, he towers over the crowd.

“I don’t have a team!” He shouts, cupping his hands around his mouth to make his voice louder. He searches desperately for a word he can use. The Empress called them her children, Karl included. The Empress called Karl her child. The Empress is an Empress, which would make Karl a prince, if he was her child. A prince - a prince doesn’t have *friends*. That was George’s whole shtick, wasn’t it? The lonely prince, out of reach from those closest to him? Dream and Sapnap, they couldn’t be his friends while he was a prince, that was the problem. That was why he wanted to run away. Even Dream, the man George had wanted to marry since he was young, was just a glorified attendant to someone of George’s station. Princes don’t have friends, they have -

“Retainers! I have retainers!”

The Empress turns her eyes on him as he speaks. Karl doesn’t let himself wilt like Orion did; he’s spoken to kings and queens before. He’d looked Schlatt dead in the face while he’d threatened Sapnap and told him he was stupid. This Empress and her Court and her magic and her compulsions - they don’t mean shit to him.

“I have retainers. A retinue.” He repeats when she doesn’t answer, doubling down. Not a lie, on a technicality. He holds on tight to that technicality. “I’m of nobility. It wouldn’t be proper, would it, to be without them? I’m allowed to keep them, am I not!? Or does the Court rob me of my dignity?”

“*Retainers?*” George demands, but it’s practically a whisper compared to Karl’s full-throttle yelling to be heard. Karl slaps down at him to shut the fuck up, regardless.

“A retinue.” The Empress says after a long moment of silence, even the crowd around them ceasing the whispers to hear her answer. “I suppose it would not be proper to rob a noble of their retinue.”

Karl holds his breath. It worked? Holy shit, it worked. He feels woozy. He feels Dream gripping his knees so hard that he may dislocate his knee caps. Karl curls his hands into fists, feels his nails bite into his palms.

“I will allow servants to partake on behalf of their master,” The Empress declares. The whispers start up again, relief at the loophole being accepted. “*But,*” She continues, bringing silence back, “No members of my Court may participate. It would be an unfair advantage, to have the power and cunning of a Vex during a trial such as this.”

It is only because Karl is still on Dream that he sees, yards ahead of them in the crowd, the floating Vex who had reunited with their friend hours ago turn to face the friend. The stray clutches at the Vex but they drift back and out of reach, toward the edge of the crowd.

Karl can’t let himself feel bad. It’s an advantage to his own chances at winning whatever this trial is, that an opponent isn’t backed by a Vex. Karl knows that the five of them are the biggest group; he’d been watching the crowd of strays for hours, collecting thoughts on each of the ones he saw. He’s got the best chances, now, with the help of his friends.

Maybe all isn’t lost, after all.

“Now,” the Empress puts her palms together again. “Enough questions. I wish each of you luck, though winning this trial will prove that you have no need for luck at all.”

She turns her back to them again.

He sees a glow, faintly purple, begin to emit from the floor. He looks down, but all he can see is blond hair.

“Hold on,” he hears Sapnap say, and then the glow grows brilliant and blinding and Dream falls out from under Karl with a bitten-off shriek. Karl squeaks, expecting to hit hard ground - instead, it is only air.

Another portal.

He reaches out, desperate to make contact with *something*, and finds a flailing hand. He grabs on, hoping that it belongs to one of *his* people, and clings for dear life as he’s taken to a trial that may be their only way to get home.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Well. That last chapter, huh?

Our beloved Nat made some art for that chapter - [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) BUT some very talented people on our discord don't always post them publicly, so join in here (<https://discord.gg/xZeqH5xUcK>), if you want to see these arts, as well as get little hits and snippets for later chapter/works AND we do a weekly reading of the latest chapter, and you only have a few of those left before we're done!!

Anyway.... we do have some tws for this chapter. good luck. we love u. Hold onto that angst with a happy ending tag.

tw gore and graphic descriptions of violence (like, a lot), minor character death, and temporary character death.

Sapnap lands on his feet, at least.

None of the others are so lucky; they land in a jumbled mess around him. Quackity blinks up at him from where he's been laid out on his back, Karl splayed on top of him and looking as discombobulated as Sapnap feels. When Dream materializes, it's directly on top of both of them and, with a squawk and bugging eyes, Quackity shoves them off forcibly so they end up a pile of tangled limbs, bone wings, and diamond armor.

"Fucking *portals*," George says, getting up from where he landed behind Sapnap. "Don't they know how else to transport people?"

"Everyone alright?" Sapnap asks, "No broken limbs?"

"A-okay," Karl says, groaning as he sits up, struggling with his centre of gravity, off as it is with the bone wings, "That *sucked*."

"The portal, or everything else?" Quackity asks.

"I think it's fair to say that everything about this situation sucks, baby," Karl says. "Any idea where we ended up?"

Sapnap looks around. Since arriving, there's been a cacophony of noise as the rest of the strays - *competitors* - come into being around them. Shouts as people search for their friends, wails of pain as the landing results in broken ankles or twisted knees. Gasps as they take in the space around them.

The ground they've landed on is unlike any that Sapnap has ever seen. Whatever the black and white flecked rock is that sits beneath their feet, it's denser and stronger than anything Sapnap has encountered before. Certainly unforgiving, if the scrapes on Quackity's palms are anything to go by.

The sky - if it can even be called that - goes on and on for forever and is filled with smoke, as if from an enormous fire. Ash and embers float through the air from seemingly no source, and the whole place stinks of burning hair and fear. Sapnap gazes up and spots what he, at first, thinks are balls of fire floating in the sky until he realizes that they're fucking blazes, wandering around up there. They swoop lower, random flames bursting out of them in shots directed downward, though not yet at them.

The only thing that isn't the endless horizon is the structure in front of them. Tall walls, twisted and turning around the edges, and one undeniable entrance. It takes a moment for Sapnap to recognise it for what it is, but once the thought occurs, it's undeniable.

A maze.

"Well," Karl says, and Sapnap sees that his own gaze is locked on the maze in front of them, "At least her challenge appears to be simple in its explanation. Find the middle, find the prize. It'll be getting there that's the problem."

Other strays appear to have realized this as well. It's a range of reactions, from the foolhardy to the forsaken. Some strays, still with that adoring, glazed look, start into the maze immediately, fighting each other for the chance to enter it first. Some are followed by their friends; some disappear as their companions shout for them fruitlessly. Others simply drop to the ground. The stray that had been reunited with a Vex that had once been their friend pulls their knees to their chest and bursts into despairing sobs.

Sapnap is already moving forward, towards the entrance, when Dream grabs his arm.

"It's better to wait," He says, quietly, when Sapnap resists.

"They'll be ahead of us!" Sapnap argues, "It's the first there, being cautious will mean we're last."

"Let them take care of each other," Dream says grimly, "There'll be enough competition in there. We'll wait for a bit, and then when we go in. Most of them will have taken each other out."

Sapnap purses his lips, but George is nodding, and Quackity is worrying his teeth between his lips at the sight of so many still rushing forward.

"Fine." He acquiesces, "But not too long."

There are others that appear to have had a similar idea; at least, those who haven't completely given up. A few individuals have started to make their way around the outskirts of the maze. It's an idea, but somehow Sapnap doesn't think that the Empress is the kind of person to put a shortcut in her death trap.

To distract himself from the urge to race ahead and get this whole debacle over and done with, he settles for focusing on the others so he stops thinking about their disadvantage.

“I haven’t had much chance to check in,” He says to Quackity in a low voice as he checks over his scraped hands, “How are you holding up?”

“Dream’s cloak has helped with the heat.” Quackity shrugs, “I’m fine. Are you keeping your head on straight?”

“Trying.” Sapnap flashes a quick, nervous smile at him, glancing up from Quackity’s hands.

“We’re almost done,” Quackity waits until he’s assured himself that the scrapes are minor and then carefully grips Sapnap’s hand, squeezing with his fingers to avoid putting pressure on his palms. “We’ve got the advantage here.”

“Not for long, if we don’t go in soon.”

“Slow and steady wins the race,” Dream speaks up, though his voice is dull. When Sapnap looks at him, Dream’s got a hand on Nightmare but the sword isn’t drawn. He’s watching the entrance, but he turns occasionally to check in on the competitors that have also stayed behind.

Sapnap doesn’t answer, but he feels the impatience brewing. He can see where Dream is coming from and, when he pushes past the desire to just *go*, he can see why it’s the smartest choice. There will be no mercy in this maze, Sapnap knows, and it’s smart to let other people take out the weakest links first. It’ll lower their competition, and it will tire out the stronger competitors before their group even reaches them.

But Sapnap can’t shake the idea that it’s a call that has just as many drawbacks as it does benefits. What if they can’t find their way? What if those stronger competitors get to the middle first? What if there are obstacles that are harder to navigate for those who come through later? Sapnap has never gone through a maze any more intense than the simple one in the castle gardens before, let alone one built by a fucking goddess. He has no idea what the right call is; he just knows that his instinct is to *go* and the longer they stand around, waiting for their problems to take care of themselves, the more prickly his skin is getting.

He feels himself heating up. His flame flares and sparks in his chest, warming his core.

“Sap,” Quackity says, bringing Sapnap’s attention back to him sharply. “You’re getting hot.”

“Shit,” Sapnap drops Quackity’s hands, “Fuck, sorry, did I burn you?”

“No,” Quackity says, because he always does. Even when Sapnap leaves red marks on him, he always says no. There’s no red this time, at least, though Sapnap still feels bad..

“Sorry,” Sapnap says again, forcing himself to lower his body temperature. “Got lost.”

“Come back,” George leans over and nudges him, “Don’t get lost before we even go in.”

“How long are we waiting?” Sapnap complains, frowning as he finds Dream again, “It’s been ten minutes. How much of a head start are we giving?”

“Half an hour?” Dream proposes.

“If you want me to climb out of my skin.” Sapnap says firmly. “That’s too long.”

“I know it feels like we’re giving up a lot of ground,” Sapnap watches the way Dream holds Nightmare’s pommel, how his hand tightens as he talks, “But this is the safest option. We have to be smart about this.”

“I get it,” Sapnap allows, “I know what you’re saying. But we can’t risk people getting too ahead. We’ve got the advantage, but not everyone here is like those guys. They’re threats and we need to take care of them.”

“We do,” Dream agrees, “But let them take care of each other first. We know that this has been going on for months, at least, judging by how long Karl’s been changing. No one’s won this trial yet. It’s not likely that there will be two teams capable of breaking that streak in this group.”

“Not teams,” Karl corrects, arms crossed as he speaks, face thoughtful, “Just in case anyone is listening.”

“Not a team,” Dream rolls his eyes, “Sorry, my *lord*,”

“Hey,” George grumbles, “Watch it.”

“Thank you ever so much for sacrificing your knight to my service,” Karl smiles, amused despite the situation. Sapnap wants to smile along with the joke, but he can’t. Karl looks fucking sick. If walking into the Nether made him look like his skin was glowing, his hair tinged with crimson, then his brief time in the Court had completely reversed that. He looks *ill*; pale as milk, no iris at all in his eyes, lips bloodless, bones hanging limply from his back, connected with gray, tendon-like strands. Karl has always been small, but it seems like he’s lost ten pounds in the last few days, dangerously thin. Sapnap thinks he might accidentally break him if he touches him. Sapnap is trying to stay calm, because he doesn’t want to scare any of them, but his flame feels like it’s going to swell up and consume him with every second that he looks at his lover.

“It’s temporary,” George mutters, crossing his arms, “I don’t loan him out to just anybody, you know.”

“Don’t worry,” Karl puts his hands up, smiling wider - enough for Sapnap to see the sharpness of his teeth, as he says, “I don’t have designs on your knight, Your Majesty.”

“Keep it that way,” George sniffs, “Why did you have to say that, anyway?”

“What, and have her keep you behind?” Karl says, “She addressed us as her children, so I used a loophole. Plus, Sapnap is a noble, so that makes me...something. And unlike *you*, he

isn't giving up his title soon." Karl elbows George with a smile, and for a moment, it feels like everything is normal.

Then another group enters the maze and Sapnap clenches his fist to stop his body moving forward alone.

"I'm going to count our supplies," He says, "Make sure we have enough for the journey back, because I don't think the Empress will give us a helpful teleport."

"I'll help," Quackity offers, and kneels down beside him. "Karl?"

"Gonna have a quick look at the outside wall," Karl says, "I won't go in, don't worry."

Sapnap can't help but look a bit skeptical, and Karl leans over, gives him a quick kiss to the top of his head. He can feel the scrape of his sharpened teeth against his skin.

"I'll go with you." Dream says, "I want to check the perimeter, too. George, come with us."

"I was gonna." George rolls his eyes at Dream, who has already started to frown, "*Seriously*, Dream, like I was going to do anything otherwise."

"Don't take too long," Sapnap says, instead of what he actually wants to say, which is screaming about how stupid it is to split up, even if only so briefly. He watches the three of them head toward the outside wall of the maze, Karl acting as a buffer between his two feuding friends.

"I wish you guys would stop being so snappy with each other," Quackity sighs, watching, too.

"I'm not!" Sapnap protests, but he knows it's a lie even as he says it. He deflates when Quackity just raises an eyebrow. "Dream is starting it. We had a whole talk and I felt like we finally got somewhere and were on the same page, and then he just - flipped the script on me the second we got here."

"He's scared," Quackity frowns, turning back to the enderchest and beginning to sift through the contents, leaning down until his whole arm disappears into the magicked depths so he can reach what he's searching for.

"We're all scared," Sapnap mutters, "But you don't see George and me ordering everyone around."

"I actually remember a time not too long back when you were acting *pretty* similar," Quackity reappears from the chest, a teasing smile on his lips that makes Sapnap cross his arms.

"I wasn't *this* bad."

"You made us march that first day until we almost got separated. I threw up."

"I stopped!"

“So did Dream,” Quackity reaches up and pokes him in the cheek, “Stop throwing stones. Be mad if you’re going to be mad, but just remember exactly why you were trying so hard to be him back then. He’s trying to keep us safe, just like you were. Just like you are now.”

“Yeah, well...” Sapnap mutters, unwilling to give in just yet. Maybe, when they’re away from the situation, and Sapnap has had time to cool down, he’ll be able to see it from Quackity’s point of view. Right now, he’s pissy and irritated and stressed out, and Dream keeps saying shit that doesn’t at fucking all sound like he’s trying to relax. He’s clenched so tight that he’s grating against Sapnap and now George is just as keyed up. Sapnap knows that, as always, the three of them are just feeding into each other, ratcheting each other up every time one of them gets more annoyed with the other. Unfortunately, it’s never been a cycle that they’ve been able to break themselves out of. Usually, when they were fighting like this, Bad would knock their heads together and make them scrub laundry until they were ready to make up or face more sheets.

There’s no Bad in the Nether. There’s no sheets to clean. It’s just the three of them, and two people who are too tired and worried in their own right to have to try to keep them from tearing each other’s heads off.

Guilt prickles at him, a quiet reminder that Dream has far more reason to act unreasonable than Sapnap does, but Sapnap doesn’t want to deal with that right now.

“Whatever.” He settles on. “He’s being a dick.”

“Okay,” Quackity says, rolling his eyes, “I’m going to start the count now. Feel free to join me when you’re done griping.”

Sapnap grumbles again but does join him in counting.

It's routine, methodical work. He counts and recounts the potions, as Quackity pulls out their rations and sorts them into neat piles on the strange ragged earth. The count comes back the same each time. He doesn’t regret a single use of any of them, but it still makes him nervous.

“We’ve still got plenty of slowness potions,” He says, “A couple fire res, too.”

“Give me a few,” Quackity requests and Sapnap hands over a fire res, two slowness, and their only weakness potion. He puts the other six away, careful to wrap them so they don’t jostle and douse everything in the chest.

“We should be okay for the journey back, food-wise, too,” Quackity says as he starts to put the potions into Karl’s bag, which he’s seemingly claimed as his own over the last while, much to Sapnap’s amusement. He pauses, looking into the bag with a perplexed expression that quickly turns to vague askance. “Oh, do we have room in the enderchest for anything else?”

“Did you pick up a souvenir?” Sapnap peers into the chest, “Depends on how big it is. Why?”

“Why the fuck would I want a souvenir from the Nether?” Quackity says, raising an eyebrow, before sighing, “It’s...well, it’s Wilbur’s thing.” He pulls said thing out of his bag. Sapnap didn’t get a good look at whatever Wilbur had given him while he was in the End, and Quackity hadn’t brought it up since. Now, he takes a glance over it and isn’t impressed. It’s just...a black rock. Vaguely oval shaped, tapered toward one end but cut roughly, as if someone had simply chiseled it out of a larger rock. “Whatever the fuck it is.”

“Looks like an egg,” Sapnap comments, and starts shifting things around in the chest, “Wasn’t it supposed to help with the Empress or something?”

“Yeah, fat lot of good it did us.” Quackity snorts, “I’m still half convinced Wilbur gave it to me as a joke.”

“Jokes on him, then; we’ve got his fancy prince rock.” Sapnap says, and pulls his hands from the chest, “Yeah, unless we want to put the fancy, unknown rock right next to the fragile potions and all our food, I don’t think it should go in here, dude.”

“That’s what she said.” Quackity says, grinning like the asshole he is, and Sapnap can’t help but grin back despite his outward groan.

It fades into something more fond as he looks Quackity over; he’s pale, but not like Karl. His face is shiny from sweat, but his eyes are warm and his smile is still the same. It’s a comfort, at least, to have Quackity much the same as he ever has been. With Dream so distant, and George so distracted, and Karl so endangered, he needs Quackity’s stability.

“Shut the fuck up, man.” Sapnap says, nudging at Quackity with his shoulder, “Whatever, we don’t want the stupid egg-rock, anyway. Just throw it away.”

“I’m not throwing it away, it could be useful. Are you jealous of a *rock*?” Quackity teases, looking vaguely thrilled as, instead of tucking the rock back into his bag, he tucks it into his trouser pocket. They’re big enough, and with the armour hanging down, there’s no tell-tale lump.

“How can I be jealous of a rock?” Sapnap says, shutting the chest, “I’m hotter and better than a rock any day. A rock can’t do this,” He catches Quackity’s hand, runs his fingers from Quackity’s palm to his shoulder to his cheek, pulling him forward with a smirk, “Or this,”

Like all their kisses back home, Quackity kisses softly, carefully, like they have all the time in the world. It reminds him of cool sheets and soft earth and shaded corners of their garden. He aches for home in that moment more than he ever has. He never wants to give this up. He wants this every day, every moment, until the day he dies.

Gods, Sapnap wants to go home.

“Kissing without me?” Karl’s voice approaches, and Sapnap turns; thankfully, he still seems the same as he did when he left, flanked by George and Dream.

“Never, darlin’,” Sapnap says, “Find anything useful?”

“Solid walls as far as the eye can see.” Dream says.

George adds, “We could hear screaming from inside.”

Quackty winces. Sapnap stands.

“We should go.”

Dream looks like he might argue, but George puts a hand on his arm. “Sapnap’s right. We’ve waited a while. Done as much scouting as we can. Nowhere else to go but forward, now.”

“We’ve got to go in at some point.” Quackity says, eyes lingering on the maze in front of them..

“Now,” Sapnap agrees, though Dream looks mutinous.

“We could wait a bit longer,” Dream tries one last time, when they’ve reached the entrance. It’s marked by a streak of glow stone, the only thing to light their way.

“No.” Sapnap says and rips the bottom of his cloak into a ribbon. He wraps it around his hand and forces all of his heat into one point. Between one second and the next, the part of the fabric in his palm has burst into flames and crackles merrily.

“I can’t do this for long.” He warns, holding the flame up and into the darkness.

“Then we go.” Karl says, though his voice is weak. George is the one to take the first step, once again, and they all follow.

If the world outside the maze was open and endless, then the first impression Sapnap has of the labyrinth is that it is confined and cramped, and without a speck of light. Though the top is open to the hazy sky, it’s so dark above that there may as well be yet more of the hard stone for all the good it does.

Their only saving grace is that, at least in this, Dream’s plan worked out. People have lit the maze up as they went through; there are torches staked into the ground which lead into the distant curves of corners, while others have instead left small deposits of what Sapnap realizes is crushed glowstone, trails of glowing dust that led in other directions. They discover the first torch and glowstone paths just as the last of his hand-held flame dies away.

Sapnap resists the urge to curse his flame. If he’d not been sick, he’d probably be to the point where he could sustain a flame in his palm like his dad could by now. As it stands, even just that little bit of ignition brought a sweat to his brow that he’s lucky the darkness covered.

“Well,” George says at their first decision to make, a long hallway of corridors that Sapnap has no fucking idea how to pick through. “This is it. Karl? Any tingling senses taking you to the Court?”

“No.” Karl admits. “That was gone as soon as we reached the portal at the Bastion. I’m as lost as you are.”

“Well, fuck,” Quackity pulls Dream’s cloak tighter around himself, “What now, then? How do we decide?”

“We just...pick.” Sapnap points at the farthest hall, “Eenie, meanie, minie -”

“No.” Dream cuts in, “We check them. They may be dead ends, which will cut things out. We need to do this methodically or we’re going to get lost in here.”

“We don’t have time to check them all,” George argues, “We’ll spend the rest of our lives here!”

“The bodies will tell us if we’re going the right way.” Dream counters. “If there are bodies, it means more people tried to go that way. They’ve been in here long enough that they’ll have found the start to the right answer, at least.”

“Cold,” Karl shivers, “But smart. I agree with Dream, let’s check all of these first and see what we can see. Should we split up?”

“No.” Dream and Sapnap say together, the first thing they’ve agreed on since they went through the damn portal in Kinoko.

Despite Sapnap’s itch to just pick one and go, they do check each of the five corridors. As Dream predicted, two of them are dead ends, two don’t seem promising - their light trails ending in front of pitch black darkness. The last has bodies.

“I really don’t want that to be the way forward.” George says.

“The lights go on after,” Dream says, voice solemn, “It’s the best way forward.”

“Just don’t look at them,” Sapnap says, “Come on. Careful now,”

“They were...” Karl swallows, as they step past. It’s not the first dead body he’s seen, Sapnap himself has put plenty of them in front of Karl by this point, but the sight of death still makes him queasy. “They were like -”

“Don’t start.” Dream says, “Or you’ll never be able to stop.”

He sounds like he’s speaking from experience, but Sapnap doesn’t even know where he’d have gotten it. Growing up, they’d had a lot of fights, but Sapnap could count on three fingers the number of times they’d had to defend George in a life or death situation. Sapnap hadn’t taken his first life until he and George had gone on the run. It had been a merc, the first of many that Sapnap and Nightmare had killed to protect himself and George. Since they’ve been reunited, he’s only seen Dream actually fight on the ship. When had Dream become so familiar with stepping over bodies, compartmentalizing them away like he had at the camp and in the Bastion? Sapnap presumes the Nether, but he doesn’t know for *sure*. Dream had never gone into detail about his time on the other side of the throne, and Sapnap hadn’t asked. He regrets it now.

He’s fucking hates feeling uncertain about Dream. It’s like there are empty spots between them that just keep growing bigger and bigger, the longer they’re in this place and Dream

isn't interested in filling them in. The uncertainty feels like taking TNT to the foundation of his entire world. He isn't sure how long he can stand the explosions. Quackity was right, maybe Sapnap is holding Dream to a standard that Sapnap himself couldn't meet during the worst moments in his life, but maybe Dream shouldn't have spoiled Sapnap so much if he didn't want to deal with the repercussions of Sapnap *being* spoiled. Sapnap is scared and overwhelmed and he wants to lean on Dream, but he isn't sure that Dream won't crumple under the weight. He wants Dream to lean on him, but it feels like Dream isn't even reaching back, let alone standing with him.

The first hallway is long, lit up by torchlight that fades before they reach even half-way up the walls, and thankfully only leads to one turn after nearly five minutes of walking, made longer by their slow pace as they carefully examine the way for traps.

They reach the end of the hall eventually and, at the next turn, they find a pathway. More precisely, they find a small space of sorts with two ways out, though one is clearly non-functional. It looks like some kind of mechanism, Sapnap thinks, because there are a handful of buttons embedded into one wall, a number of levels along the opposite side. A few are pressed or flipped down.

One of the paths is open, lights leading off into the unknown. It has footprints in the dust outside of it, though they're stamped down and almost unrecognizable from each other. The other path is closed off with thick stone, almost blending into the wall. It would be nearly invisible if not for the halo of red splattered in front of it in a sick arc and the viscera keeping it open, blocking it from closing completely.

It was a person, once. The body is wedged tightly, nearly bisected by the wall that's dropped down on it, limp arms flailed out as if still trying to crawl out of the way. Sapnap carefully steps forward to get a closer look and feels something crunch underfoot. He winces, looking down, and, through the low light of the torches, he lifts his boot to see a pair of now-crushed glasses.

"Shit," He says, as he looks back at the body. Though the light is low enough to not make out the gory details, the face, even twisted in fright and pain, is clear enough.

Orion.

"Oh," Karl says, quietly.

"He was just a fucking student," Quackity says, voice low.

"It would have been quick," George says, swallowing hard, "There's that, at least."

There's a pause, much to Sapnap's chagrin. It's not as if paying respects is going to help them win this thing. He tries to rationalize that Orion would have had to die anyway, for them to survive. Either here, or another way.

Sapnap decides he doesn't like rationalizing very much.

"Come on." Dream says, tugging them forward, "We should get going."

They are utterly silent as they pass into the open hallway.

"What was it like?" Sapnap hears Quackity ask, quietly, as he and Karl walk in front of him, "The Empress' compulsion?"

Karl hums, scuffing his feet against the bedrock.

"You know in stories," He says, "When they talk about lovers, how they love each other so much they can't look away? It was kinda like that. She was there and it was like I had everything I needed, right in front of me. Like I didn't need to do anything except try to please her."

"Almost sounds like that poetry talk you pull out for us sometimes." Quackity says, laced with something green and jealous, "The center of your universe and all that."

"I couldn't stop looking at her, it's true," Karl says, "But I never *want* to stop looking at you. That's the difference."

"Okay," Quackity says, "And how are you...managing, right now?"

"Like I'm back on that rock," Karl replies, after a long pause, "Teetering on the edge."

"We won't let you go," Quackity promises, and Sapnap watches him squeeze Karl's hand tight.

"I know," Karl smiles, and when he does, he smiles with all of his teeth.

Sapnap's last and only experience of a maze was the hedge maze in the endless gardens of the palace. This is only serving to remind him why he never stepped foot in there more than once. Mazes are *frustrating*. Instead of a clear way forward, there are twists, trails that turn them around and leave them disoriented. Trying to solve this maze is like a physical example of trying to have a conversation with one of the others when they're in the mood to be difficult.

Sapnap stops counting dead ends after the fifth time that Dream scratches a cross into the walls with Nightmare. He barely holds back a sigh when they backtrack, yet *again*.

"We can't keep being this thorough," He says to Dream what feels like hours later, "We need to pick a path and stick with it, or we're going to run out of time."

At least this path is a little more interesting than the others. The walls rise up either side, as usual, but between the path they walk on and the wall is a sheer drop into nothing at all. The path winds and if it weren't for the torches along their way, it would be very easy to simply step off the path into oblivion.

"We aren't on a time limit, Sapnap," Dream replies, "I don't want us getting completely lost and wasting time following paths we've already tried."

"We're wasting time now!" Sapnap says, and Dream opens his mouth to snap something back, frustration obvious in the glare he cuts Sapnap's way, but George holds up a hand to silence them both.

"Both of you, shut up." He says and Sapnap turns sharp eyes on him, but George looks serious and focused so Sapnap subsides. George continues, voice dropping into near-whispering, "Do you hear that?"

Sapnap frowns and closes his eyes, straining his ears to hear whatever George has noticed. At first, he doesn't, but he hears Dream's breathing change as he picks up on it; and then, Sapnap hears it, too.

George is right. In the distance, there's the sound of voices. Two, if Sapnap listens closely. They grow louder. They're arguing.

He exchanges a glance with Karl, whose lips are turning down in a stressed frown the longer they stand in one place, and then he turns toward the voices and starts walking, careful of his steps.

Soon, the voices are clearer; both because their group is getting closer and because the arguing is getting even louder.

Sapnap turns into a corridor and finds yet more paths to take, but the voices are clear now, easily picked up and understood and guiding.

"One of us needs to go up first!" one voice says, irritation practically dripping from each word.

"Like I'm going to let you go! You'd just leave me behind, Mike, I'm not -" Another voice snaps, lightly accented like that of the upper echelon of Kinoko.

"Shut the fuck up! You said you'd follow me, Toby!"

Sapnap looks at Dream, brow furrowed. The voices are familiar. Sapnap is pretty sure that these two are the duo that entered the maze before their group did. Sapnap had been worried about them; both of them are young and strong and they'd looked dangerous as they'd sat together, muttering amongst each other.

The path splits into two in front of them; the voices come from the left. Sapnap only needs to glance down the right path to see that it is a dead end.

Dream nods at his look, presses a finger to his lips. He gestures for them to crouch and carefully tiptoe forward. George draws his bow and notches an arrow, pointing the tip toward the barely-lit path, and they move forward as a group in silence. Sapnap thinks that Quackity has stopped breathing, axe tight in his hand.

"We're not even supposed to be working together, you asshole! I'm doing you a favour, sticking with you!" Toby spits, voice ever-louder as they approach.

“A *favor*?” Mike laughs cruelly, “Please! If it weren’t for me, you’d have ended up like all those losers back there!”

“That’s not true!”

“Yes, it is! Yes, it is, you weak fuck, so just boost me and we can move the fuck on!”

“No, you boost me!”

Sapnap doesn’t want to poke the proverbial bear, but they need to get past whatever quarrel is happening here and he needs to assess the threat. From the tension in Dream’s form, he feels the same. Sapnap doubts these are the sort of people to just let them go first while they figure shit out amongst themselves.

Sapnap waves his hands in a ‘stay’ motion and gets an eye roll from George and a glare from Karl, who flexes his claws obviously, but the three of them at least look willing to listen for now. He pretends that he trusts them to not blow their cover and leans forward, joining Dream in poking their heads around the next corner to get a glimpse at their potential opponents.

He sees them, and the problem, immediately.

It’s another small opening, like the little puzzle area where they’d found Orion, and there is another trap that’s already been activated. This time, there is only one exit to the little clearing, but it’s been covered up by a stone slate.

Leading up to the stone slate is what Sapnap realizes with horror is a yawning chasm, a few pillars acting as stepping-stones from one side to the other.

Mike and Toby have passed the void and are arguing on the other side of it, in front of the slate. Sapnap picks up on that issue pretty quickly, too; the slate is big but it isn’t too much taller than an averagely-heighted person. One of them could boost the other up and climb over it, pulling their partner along after.

“This is such bullshit,” Toby says and Sapnap sees him shove Mike as they argue, nearly nose-to-nose until Toby puts some distance between them with the shove, “You wouldn’t have even made it across the hole if I hadn’t helped you!”

“I would have been fine without you,” Mike motions emphatically, “I didn’t need your help!”

“Well, you need my help now, don’t you?” Toby sneers, “Otherwise, you’re fucking stuck. I’m not boosting you so -”

“You’re *going* to boost me,” Mike’s voice drops and he steps toward Toby, menacing, “Or so help me, Tobes.”

“Or what?” Toby scoffs at him, crossing his arms, “You’ll what? You *need* me. Otherwise, you won’t get over it. You’ll be stuck and you’ll die in the maze.”

“I *don’t* need you.” Mike steps forward again and shoves Toby hard, who stumbles back and away from the wall with a yelp, “I don’t need you, I never needed you, I don’t need anyone!”

“Who helped you get over the hole?” Toby straightens up and launches himself at Mike, shoving him harder, “Who shared their food with you while we were at the Court? Who gave you the only healing potion we had when we were in the Nether and your stupid wings came in? Who found the portal,” Toby shoves Mike again, “in the first,” he shoves him again, back toward the stone, “place!?”

Sapnap watches, the horror only mounting, as he sees them get closer to the edge of the chasm.

“I didn’t *ask* for any of that!” Mike shouts, driving Toby back with a shove of his own, “I didn’t *ask* for any of this! I don’t fucking need you, I would have been *fine* on my own! I would have made it just as fucking far without *you*!”

“No, you wouldn’t have!” Toby laughs mockingly, stumbling back again when he’s pushed even as he verbally stabs at his partner, “You’re useless without me! In fact, I’d say that you’re just *using* me, you’ve been using me this whole time! You wouldn’t be anywhere without me!”

“Fuck,” Mike lurches forward, more strength than at any time before as he pushes him again, “*you*, Toby!”

Toby reels back from the shove and Sapnap feels his body jerk forward as he sees Toby step back and miss the ground altogether. Instead, Toby’s foot finds only the void.

It’s like slow motion, watching Toby fall. Sapnap can’t see his face, but he sees Mike’s as it goes from angry to shocked to devastated in the span of the second it takes him to register what’s happened.

“*Toby!*” Mike shouts, arms stretching out as he tries to grab his partner.

Toby shrieks, grabbing desperately for Mike’s hand and catching it. Mike gets yanked forward, too, not enough momentum on his side to stop himself from getting pulled over the edge.

Sapnap sees them both tip over the edge, sees the desperate hand that latches on to the edge of the chasm as Mike clings on for dear life.

“Oh fuck,” He hears Mike shout, “Oh, fuck, you fucking *idiot*, you pulled us both over!”

“You pushed me!” Toby screams back, “You pushed me, you *fucker*, I can’t believe you actually pushed me!”

“I didn’t *mean to!*” Mike responds hysterically, “C-Climb up! Climb up a-a-and - stop! Stop, stop, you’re pulling us down, stop!”

“What else are we supposed to do!?”

Sapnap stands up, eyes tracing the columns as he moves forward. If he's quick, he can probably reach the other side before they fall. He -

A hand catches his wrist, stopping him up short.

He frowns, looking over his shoulder. Dream has his wrist, face blank.

"What are you doing?" He whispers, tugging, "We have to go help them!"

Dream stares at the hand still clinging to the side of the hole, the voices growing steadily more fearful and upset as seconds pass, and then he looks at Sapnap.

"We can't." He says, and it's like the words don't compute in Sapnap's brain.

"What?" He asks, his voice coming off light from the shock, "Dream, let me go. We need to go help them."

"They just pushed each other off a cliff, Sapnap." Dream says firmly. "They're not trustworthy. What happens if we save them? They join us? They'd sooner stab us in the back. They're enemies. Saving them would just mean killing them later and we need to save our energy."

"*What?*" Sapnap yanks his wrist back, stepping away from Dream and farther into the clearing. "Dream, what the fuck?"

Dream frowns, brows scrunching as he looks at Sapnap.

"We can't." He says again.

"I can't hold on," Mike says from behind him, "Fuck, Toby -"

"Let me go!" Toby says, panicking, "Let me go, climb up -"

"And what? S-starve to death? I'm stuck here without you!" Mike demands, "Try climbing up again, try -"

"Mike, come on, just -"

"I said try climbing up again, you stupid fuck!"

"Dream," Sapnap says, almost begging. "We can save them."

"We can't." Dream repeats himself, standing up, too.

"T-Toby," Mike says, sounding scared, and Sapnap whips around just in time to see Mike's hand disappear. There are two screams, and they fade out in seconds, leaving an echoing silence.

"It's safe." Dream says blandly and brushes past Sapnap.

Sapnap can't stop staring at where Mike's hand was.

“Sap?” Karl stops at his side, putting a careful hand to his elbow. “Are you okay?”

“I...” Sapnap tries to answer but his throat is dry. He turns to look at Dream and finds him already half-way across the chasm, helping Quackity along while George waits for Sapnap and Karl, bow still drawn.

“I don’t know.” He admits. He feels like he’s looking at Dream but seeing someone completely different. Dream isn’t wearing the porcelain mask but Sapnap can see it regardless. That mask and that robe and the undeniable feeling that the world, save one person, is entirely meaningless, himself included, to the person behind it.

“Come on,” Karl nudges him gently. “Let’s just get out of here.”

Sapnap nods, catching Karl’s hand and squeezing his fingers. He’s relieved when Karl squeezes back, laces their fingers together and lets their palms align.

They make it over the chasm without a problem, except for a moment when Sapnap stumbles on the last jump and Dream catches him by the wrist and pulls him sharply. When their eyes meet, Sapnap sees that Dream’s eyes are dilated, his breathing shallow and quick.

“Okay?” He asks worriedly. Sapnap jerks out of his grip, nodding once before walking past him. He doesn’t know what to say to Dream right now. His gut says to be angry, but his brain doesn’t quite know why, yet. Dream hadn’t been wrong, with what he’d said. It’s just that it had sounded like something George might say, not *Dream*.

Sapnap doesn’t think he knows anyone as *good* as Dream. When Sapnap thinks of him, one of the first qualities that comes to mind is *kind*. Dream has always been the one that got them in trouble because he wanted to help someone. He’s never hesitated to throw himself into situations just because he felt it was the right thing to do.

Is this what the Nether does? Sapnap ponders the thought as he stands in front of the slate. Does it just...strip the humanity out of you? Physically, like with Karl, or more intrinsically? Is that what it’s done to Dream?

“Sapnap,” Dream tries to catch him again, “I -”

“Don’t.” Sapnap cuts him off, shaking his head. “I don’t want to talk about it. Boost me.”

Wordlessly, Dream laces his fingers together to boost him over the slate.

Sapnap goes up and settles on top of the slate, perched precariously. He helps them all over, drops onto the other side and into a new corridor, this one lit only with glowstone dust.

They move on without another word. Dream doesn’t try to reach for him again.

The walls close in and the tunnels get smaller once more, which Sapnap takes as a sign that they’re getting closer to the centre of the maze. He certainly hopes so. He doesn’t think he can take much more of this.

They come across a lot of dead bodies, more and more as the time goes on. Bloody scenes, fights, accidents where traps had closed on some poor, unfortunate soul. The faces all begin to blur together after a while.

Never is there anyone left alive. He's glad of that, as well as terrified. It means he doesn't need to worry about what he might have to do if faced with an injured stranger. It means he knows that if anything happens to him, no one will show him and his family any mercy.

For Karl. That's what this is. This is for Karl, so they can beat this dumb trial and get the fuck home, and try not to wake up screaming from these new nightmares.

Dream is leading them, still. It would be reductive to say that there was something off about him, because Sapnap's known *that* since the moment they knew they would be going into the Nether. But when he turns the corner ahead, he goes even paler in the light of the glowstone dust on the ground. He looks like he might be sick when he holds up a hand to stop them.

"Guys -" He swallows, "We'll - We'll take another way. You don't have to see this."

"The last turn was about half an hour back." Sapnap argues. "We can't."

"The other way looked like a complete dead end, anyway," Quackity says.

Dream clenches his jaw. Sapnap can see him working it over.

"Fine."

Around the corner is a bloodbath.

"Oh fuck," Karl says, somehow going impossibly paler, the bones on his back hunched in horror. He covers his mouth and nose with a hand, possibly to cover the smell, "Oh *gods*,"

"I'm going to throw up," Quackity says, pulling his cloak up to his nose.

Sapnap doesn't say anything. He thinks if he speaks then the scent of iron and fear and despair will overwhelm him.

He's glad for the low light; it's harder to make out the details. Just the broken weapons, and the broken bodies, and the blood. It must have been some huge fight. Strays against other strays, or perhaps against a monster that lies deep in the maze. Maybe a turned stray. Sapnap hates that thought. He doesn't want to look at any monster and see what Karl could be.

Wherever they step, red footprints are left behind. Sapnap determinedly doesn't look down, except to try and keep out of the way of the larger bits of viscera. The room tapers off into a thinner corridor, presumably the path ahead. Blocking their path is a body.

Unlike the others, the victim is pretty intact; propped up against the wall, hands folded neatly in a lap, eyes blank and sightless, green handkerchief gone from around his neck. There is only a single wound, crimson staining his shirt. There are no bone wings on his back.

"Gee," Karl says, "Oh, no..."

“He was a fuckin’ kid,” Quackity says, “Gods, his brother -”

“It doesn’t look like he’s here,” George says, even though Sapnap knows that all of them tried not to look too hard at what was left of the bodies. “He’s not like the others, maybe... maybe the kid did what he could to lay him to rest and moved on.”

“We,” Sapnap swallows, “We should -”

“What?” Dream asks, almost harsh, “Bury him? Even if we had the time, we can’t break through this kind of rock. There’s nothing we can do now, but hope we don’t bump into what killed him.”

“Dream!”

“Shut up, both of you!” George snaps, “This is fresh! Whatever killed Gee and these people could still be around!”

Sapnap looks down; in his periphery, Dream does the same. He looks almost guilty at George’s admonishment, and viciously, Sapnap thinks ‘*good.*’

“Let’s get out of here,” George says, “Let’s just fucking *go*,”

“Agreed,” Dream says, and starts to move forward. One by one, they step over the corpse. Sapnap is last.

“Sorry, kid,” He mutters, though he has no idea what he’s apologizing for.

It isn’t long before they hear the fight that George predicted.

‘Fight’ is the wrong word. It sounds like a massacre. They don’t need Dream gesturing for them to stay low, or the finger on Sapnap’s lips to tell them to be careful and quiet. There’s a trail of blood not left by them, and with every step, the fighting sounds closer and closer. Screams, pleas for mercy. Something roaring, scarily similar to how Karl had sounded on the ship.

The next room that they end up in is almost like a garden. Foliage; thankfully enough to keep them covered if they were to use it. The bushes and trees are a shade of thick crimson that echoes the fire swamp. It’s a circular room, and there are about seven possible corridors, and the way the room is, it feels like the sounds of battle are coming from every single one.

“Too open,” Dream mutters, and Sapnap hums an agreement. An attack could come from any side.

“The bushes.” He says, “We stay low.”

“Where’s the path with the least amount of blood?”

Sapnap pops his head up to take a clearer look. “Our one o’clock.”

It's slow, and careful, and Sapnap just wants to jump to his feet and run, but when they're halfway across, he's glad they were cautious. The fighting spills out from the path on their five o'clock, a ragged and wretched tumble of people; some strays, some not, all slashing and swinging and brawling with seemingly no end in sight. A spray of blood and one falls. A choked scream and another staggers. It's a huge group; certainly the largest he's seen since they were all gathered together. Some people are still using weapons; others are going claw to claw, fang to fang. It's vicious. Frantic. And, as one body drops right next to the bush Quackity is hiding behind, far too close.

"*Help!*" screams one, holding back a sword with a walking stick that's splintering with the force, "Help me!"

Their attacker doesn't let up, but she calls out, sounding unsure as she says, "Parker -"

"Finish it!" Another man says, presumably Parker, as he swings a mace into a woman's head and she crumples to the ground, deathly still, "Finish it, and then we can deal with that *thing!*"

Despite the merciless orders, all the fighters are unpracticed. Sapnap can see it in their movements, in their actions; a well trained fighter might be able to intervene, but two well trained fighters could probably stop it entirely, maybe prevent anyone else from dying.

Dream catches Sapnap's wrist and shakes his head. Sapnap wants to scream. Why? Why can't they help, why can't they do something, why can't they -?

He knows. He knows why. He knows that saving these people means more people they have to fight later, he knows it's better to have them take care of each other rather than having an unproven ally that will inevitably stab them in the back.

He knows it, but he doesn't have to like it. And he absolutely hates that it's *Dream's* logic.

Sapnap bites his tongue and they keep moving. Inch by inch, step by step, they creep around the battlefield and towards the only bloodless pathway. Sapnap ends up bringing up the rear, though because it's safer for the others or because he can't stomach the thought of being near a Dream he doesn't know anymore, he isn't sure.

With their luck, he should have known that it would have all gone to shit when he thought they were almost safe.

Parker turns as Sapnap crosses the last part of the floor between them and the path, and they are clear, obvious, framed by the unbreakable rock of the walls, prey frozen in flight.

"Run!" Sapnap says, snapping out of the horror first, "Run, go go go -!"

Parker shouts, "Get them!" and -

Sapnap turns, drawing his sword and -

At least half a dozen fighters, starting for them and -

Something inhuman, pale and blurred with too many limbs digs its long claws into Parker's side, flings him out of sight and goes with him in a lunge. His scream is cut off by a crunch, followed by that same, utterly alien roar.

Sapnap, to his shame, doesn't even hesitate. He turns back to his friends and he runs.

"Stop," Sapnap says, when he thinks he's about to throw up. They're several corridors away, the sounds faded into the distance, and this is as much as he can bear.

"We shouldn't," Quackity pants, staggering as his legs almost collapse under him, "We're not far enough."

"We can't keep doing this," Sapnap shakes his head, putting his hands on his knees and letting himself break, just a little. He closes his eyes tightly, breathes in and out shallowly as he tries to push the urge to hurl away.

"We don't have a choice," George's voice is painful with the strain of his run, "We've got to be at least half-way through by this point. I recognized most of the people in that brawl from the Court. I think most of them are dead by now. It's just us and a few others, I'll bet, once that clears up."

"They murdered a teenager, George!" Sapnap snaps, knowing his voice is strained. "You saw that body, you know that was them. They f-fucking," Sapnap has to stop, to breathe because he feels like he can't.

"He was a kid." He tries again. "They killed a *kid*."

"They did." George says, voice careful. "There's a reason that no one's won yet, Sap. This maze is vicious."

"The people inside are fucking vicious," Sapnap snaps, "The fucking maze is a bunch of walls and holes in the ground and puzzles, it's the fucking people who are doing this! Letting people die, killing each other, *Prime*,"

"It's how things are, here." Dream says quietly.

"Don't," Sapnap looks up, glaring daggers, "Don't you dare. We didn't have to fucking participate in this. We could have saved those guys."

"It wasn't safe." Dream doesn't look at him, staring off into the distance with a clenched jaw. "We have to be safe, Sapnap."

"We *have* to win," Sapnap stands up, forcing his lungs to open up so he can just *breathe*. "The Empress didn't say we had to kill each other. She didn't say any of us had to fucking kill each other, that was all on us."

"Would it have been better to save them, then?" Dream finally looks at him, but it's only a glance. "Give them the chance to push one of us, instead? Or maybe turn on us in that brawl?"

"I don't know." Sapnap shakes his head, "I don't fucking know what we would have done, after, but we should have fucking saved them. Is that the argument you would have made if we'd come across that kid, Dream? It's better to leave him to die, because we're going to have to kill him later?"

"*Sapnap*," George snaps, "What the fuck are you saying?"

"I'm saying that this is sick," Sapnap points at Dream, "And we're not fucking exempt from it."

Dream doesn't answer.

"What is going on with you?" Sapnap demands. "Is it the fucking heat getting to your brain? Since when do you just turn around when people are asking for help? Since when do you just step over bodies?"

"We have to." Dream says, but it's weak, and so is the argument, and both of them - all of them - know it.

"Is now the time?" Karl asks awkwardly, "We're, um, we're still in a maze full of murderous strays."

"We have to make fucking time." Sapnap snaps and Karl subsides with a wince.

"I don't know what you want from me." Dream pulls his shoulders up, finally turning a real stare on Sapnap. "I'm just trying to get us out of this alive. If people have to die so I can get you guys out, so be it."

"Whatever," Sapnap motions sharply with his hand, "I get it. Everyone's decided it's a fight to the death. I can't convince them all. I want to know what the fuck is up with *you*, Dream."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you fucking do. Marching us until Quackity faints and then trying to make us keep going? Not letting us bury a fucking body? Treating us all like we're just getting in the way of whatever grand plan you're building to save the world? You watched someone dangle until they lost strength in their hands and fell to their death, Dream, and then you moved on like it was nothing. We just stepped over the body of a fucking teenager and your biggest concern was making sure we didn't piss off his murderers. Does that fucking *sound* like Dream, George?" Sapnap turns to George, demanding.

George hesitates. When he talks, it's with reluctance. "We're in a difficult situation, Sapnap."

"Fuck me, I know he's right!" Sapnap says, "You think I don't know that by winning this stupid game, they'll probably all die anyway!? It's not *about* that!"

He turns around and stabs a finger in Dream's direction again.

"It's about you not being *you*. This isn't *you*! Dream, I know you. *I know you*," He hates how it sounds like he's trying to convince himself of the fact, "Better than anyone else, and this

whole fucking trip, since we got on Puffy's boat, it's like I've been following a fucking *stranger*."

"Don't," Dream steps forward then, cold as ice while Sapnap's skin is steaming, "Don't say that to me, I've been keeping you alive this whole time, *everything* I've been doing has been to get us all through this intact -"

"By acting like XD! You're acting *just like him*! You promised me, you promised, and you're doing it again, you're *disappearing* a-fucking-gain -"

"I was here for *two years*," Dream seethes, almost breathlessly wrathful as he pushes up against Sapnap, "Two fucking years, Sapnap, and I didn't survive by being *kind* to everything I met. I never wanted you here, *never*, but maybe it's time to wake up to the fact that the parts you didn't like about XD were still *parts of me*! I *don't* want you here, Sapnap! I'd be much fucking happier if I was alone again and *doing* this alone and *being alone* here because you *are* getting in the way!"

"Dream!" George says, sharp and admonishing, but both of them ignore him.

"Fuck you!" Sapnap explodes, "I've been with you since day fucking one -"

"Not in the *Nether*, you fucking idiot!" Dream snaps, "That's the whole *fucking problem*! You weren't here! I was here! I was here and I made it out and *you weren't* and you have *no fucking clue* what you're talking about!"

"Dream -" George tries again, but Sapnap rolls over him.

"You can't just always bring up that we weren't here, that wasn't by *choice*!"

"It doesn't matter! You weren't and I was and that makes *me* the expert here! I couldn't stop you from coming and I couldn't stop them from dying and I can't fucking fix this problem for you, Sapnap! All I can do is try to make sure none of *us* die along the way! I don't care what you think of me, I don't *care* if I'm a dick, as long as you are alive! That's how this is going to fucking go, so suck it up and stop crying about how mean I am until we're *out*!"

Sapnap hears Nightmare clatter to the ground as Dream drops the sword in favor of fisting Sapnap's collar, his knuckles brushing Sapnap's throat, "I'm *sorry* I'm not the naive kid that fell into the Nether! I'm *sorry* I'm not the person you want me to be anymore! I'm sorry I'm not good, or kind, or fucking *heroic* enough for you! But I don't fucking care about being those things right now! No matter what you think, or George thinks, or Karl or Quackity, I am *going* to get you out of here, no matter how many people I have to walk over to do it!"

Sapnap feels the heat rising in him, knows that he is starting to steam, hears his clothes start to crackle as he gets too hot for them. Despite his rage, his first worry is burning Dream so he shoves hard against his chest plate to put space between them, starting to pant as he drags air into his lungs.

"We are here," He snarls, "Whether you like it or not, we're here this time! You *aren't* fucking alone and I'm not going to lose you to this place! Not again! I'm going to get in your

way and I'm going to stay in your way because you're my best fucking friend and you are not going to lose yourself to this fucking maze or this realm or this *bitch* Empress or -"

"That's what I'm trying to make sure doesn't happen!" Dream throws his hands up, "That's what I'm *doing*!"

"Being saved doesn't matter if you're not saved *with us*, Dream!"

Sapnap watches Dream's face as they shout, the way it shifts as he finally shows some fucking emotion and stops putting on that fucking mask, identical to XD's in all but physical form. His skin is pale and he looks exhausted, only growing more so as they scream at each other. Sapnap knows, he fucking *knows* that this isn't the time or place. That it's cruel to drag this out right here, in the middle of it all. But he can't sit back, he *won't* sit back, and watch this place consume Dream anymore than he'll watch it consume Karl.

Sapnap won't lose anyone to the Nether. This place has been hanging over his head since the moment he met George and it's been trying to steal the people he loves for over half his life; he won't let it. It can't have George, it can't have Dream, it can't have Karl, it can't have *any of them*.

"You're an idiot." Dream spits, "You're a spoiled, foolish, naive -"

"Yeah, yeah, lay it on me, tell me all the things I am!" Sapnap pats his chest emphatically, squaring up, "I don't care, I don't care!"

"*Selfish*," Dream continues, seemingly to only swell bigger as he gets into it, "*child* -"

"So what!?" Sapnap spreads his arms out, "So fuckin' what? Huh? What are you gonna do about it? I'm still here, dickhead! I'm still right fucking here, and I'm not going to watch you kill yourself because you're too scared to *trust us* -"

"I'm *not* -"

"You are!"

"*Sapnap, duck* -" George cries out, breaking through the argument with the force of his terror. Sapnap doesn't duck. Instead, he tries to turn around, tries to see what makes Dream's eyes go so wide and scared.

Sapnap feels something bowl into him from behind with bone-breaking speed and force, flattening him almost immediately, Schlöng digging painfully into his gut where it's still sheathed. He feels claws grate against the diamond of his armor, before there is an animalistic yell from Dream and the weight is gone.

Sapnap is up in a flash, already turning to spot the threat - he finds it wrestling with Dream.

It's the beast that ambushed the group. Milk pale except where it is bathed in crimson, bone wings spread wide, screeching as it rolls around with Dream. They exchange blows, but, even if Dream were at the top of his game, fully rested and not starved from three days of refusing any more than half-rations, he's a human man and this...this is a monster.

Dream gets two hits in when he's pinned the thing down, knees on its wings to stop it from battering him with them, before it twists and takes Dream down.

"No!" Sapnap scrambles, loses his footing, catches himself and watches as two arrows embed themselves into the back of the creature's head in such quick succession that they almost seem simultaneous. The monster roars, rearing back, and Dream shoves uselessly at it as it twists and pulls both arms back.

"Hey, ugly! Get off him!" George tries to distract, loosing another arrow. This one finds a mark in a raised hand of the monster, but the sharp point doesn't seem to faze it any more than the two in its head did.

"R-run!" Dream grits out, and then the monster's claws come down, one after the other. Sapnap can't see them fall, but he sees a spray of blood, hears the impact. He sees Dream's squirming legs go still.

"Dream," he says, barely a whisper. His inner flame explodes out of him in a burst of heat.

Sapnap feels the fire seize his veins. His vision goes golden, as if through a haze of warmth. The world runs slowly. It feels almost like he's walking as he pushes himself from the ground and makes his way to the monster, though he knows that surely it must be faster.

Things speed up when he tackles it off of Dream. He smells cooking flesh, hears the high-pitched squeal of pain, smoke immediately beginning to seep from the places where his flesh meets the monster's. It struggles against him, claws lodging into the diamond bracers on his arms and the plating along his back, but Sapnap just reaches up, grabs it by the face. It arches, trying to tear out of his grip, but Sapnap holds on tight as it uses all of its strength to try to hurl him off. He sends every ounce of heat he can control to his palms, hears the crackle as his hands spark and snap with embers powerful enough to ignite into flames. It's powerful enough to catch at the papery skin of the creature and, even as it finally succeeds in throwing Sapnap off of it, he sees how parts of it bubble and sear from being boiled open by the open flame in his hands. A scorched and curling green handkerchief falls to the floor and begins to burn and char.

Sapnap goes sailing through the air. He hits the opposite wall, feels his bones shift from the force of it as he drops to the ground with an *oomph*.

The heat dies down as his inner flame shrinks, going low and quiet as it recovers from the sudden flare. Sapnap is immediately exhausted, eyes falling shut as the world sways and hazes in and out. He forces them back open, swaying onto his hands and knees. He hears two sets of snarling; yowls that he can immediately tell are threats. He looks up, finds that Karl and the monster are fighting, now, clawing at each other in frenzied swipes. The monster is no longer pale; instead, swathes of its body are covered in great, devastating burns, open wounds and blisters, the imprints of Sapnap's hands wrapped around its head. Underneath the burns and what is left of its skin are pulsing red veins that turn it nearly entirely crimson.

"Karl, move!" Quackity shouts and Karl skitters back, just in time for two glass bottles to shatter at the feet of the creature, drenching it in potions. It only takes another few seconds

after that, as the monster slows and wilts; Karl pins it down despite its wriggles and screams of pain and fury.

Quackity has picked up Schlong at some point and he dashes into the fray, lifting and bringing the sword down in one fell swoop on the monster with a battle cry.

The sword bites through the flesh easily. Its head goes rolling as Quackity lops it off.

The body jolts and continues to flail for just a second longer before it goes limp under Karl, who continues to pin it in place.

Quackity pants, staring down at the body for a long moment, and then he looks at Karl.

“Okay?” He demands more than he asks.

“I’m okay,” Karl turns to look at Sapnap, who wobbles to his feet. He feels his ribs shift and he wraps an arm around them with a wince but pushes through the pain. He takes a deep breath and is relieved to find nothing broken. Bruised, most likely, but not broken. He gives them a thumbs up as he starts limping toward Dream.

George is there already, kneeling at his side, babbling as he digs through the enderchest.

“Spell your name again,” He’s saying.

“D,” Dream, thank *fuck*, says, voice raspy, “R, E...”

“Finish it,” George snaps, fear turning his voice hard.

“A, M,” Dream does as commanded, “G-George, I can’t s-see -”

“Blood,” George slaps Dream’s hand when he lifts it toward his face. Sapnap swallows, dropping at his other side to get a better look.

Dream’s bleeding, and he’s bleeding a fucking lot. Sapnap can see where the blood seeps from; three long gashes that cross along his face. One starts at his right cheek bone, crosses his nose, splits his eyebrow just above his left eye and continues onto his forehead. The other two run opposite, the first beginning just under his left eye and crossing his nose, stopping at the corner of his right eye, with a third gash picking up at his brow and running to his temple. He’s bleeding so much that Sapnap is surprised he hasn’t passed out. George’s cloak is already soaked through even though it’s only being used as a pillow for Dream’s head. Sapnap can’t tell if the gashes have marred his eyes, with how tightly he’s closing them.

“Holy shit,” Sapnap says. “Holy shit, holy shit,”

“Healing potion,” Karl drops next to the chest, “W-we need -”

“We don’t have any.” George pushes Karl’s hands out of the way as he finally finds what he’s looking for and pulls a pot of glowing pink potion.

“We have two,” Karl argues, “Dream said - he said we had -”

“He was lying,” George pops the cap of the regen potion, their last healing magic, and grabs Dream’s chin, “Open.”

“I -” Dream tries to argue, but George just pops a thumb into his mouth and pries his jaw open instead of waiting for him to do as he’s told. He dumps the pot into Dream’s mouth and Dream swallows on instinct, three times, until the potion is gone.

A regen won’t heal. It won’t even staunch the bleeding; all it will do is help Dream’s body make more blood, keep him from bleeding out right there. It will numb the pain, a little, too, at least, which Sapnap can see from the way Dream’s shoulders go loose.

Karl doesn’t respond to George’s harsh truth. Sapnap wishes that George were the one lying right now. He wishes that they’d had five healing potions, or even four. He wishes.

“Dream?” He asks, voice strangled, when the potion is gone.

“S-Sap? Are you okay?” Dream reaches out blindly toward him and Sapnap catches his hand, only to yank back when Dream winces, suddenly remembering that he is probably the same temperature as a brand at the moment.

“I’m okay!” He promises, “Holy fuck, dude, I’m okay, but you -”

“I can’t see,” Dream shudders, “Did it - my eyes -”

“It’s blood,” George says, voice steady as he reaches into the chest and pulls out bandages and extra shirts, balling one shirt up and pushing it against the top of Dream’s face, “Your eyes are okay, but - stop! Don’t open them, you’ll make the bleeding worse!”

“I can’t see,” Dream repeats, his breathing starting to quicken as he reaches up to push George’s hand away, “George, I can’t -”

“I get it!” George snaps, grabbing Dream’s hand to stop him from pulling the shirt away, “There’s a lot of blood, so stop trying to open them! We need to wrap those wounds to get the bleeding to stop before you pass out so just -”

He cuts himself off, bowing his head.

Sapnap reaches out, careful to only touch his armor, hoping that the touch will steady him.

George is trembling, Sapnap realizes. His free hand shakes as he passes the bandages to Quackity and shoves the other shirt at Karl.

“Shred that to ribbons,” He orders and Karl gets to work immediately, using his sharp claws to tear the shirt apart. Quackity begins unraveling the bandages to make them easier to use.

George lets them, reaching up to grab Sapnap’s hand and hold onto it tightly as he takes deep, slow breaths despite how hot he is. Then he drops his hand to Dream’s and interlocks their fingers.

"I know you're scared." He says after a few seconds, because Dream's breathing is only getting faster, more shallow. His voice is softer, kinder, now that he's collected himself. "But you can't open your eyes right now. We need to wrap the wounds so they stop bleeding."

"I won't be able to see," Dream says, and it sounds like a sob, "*George*,"

"That's okay," Sapnap forcibly cools his hands off, every bit of focus available to him used to make sure he doesn't hurt Dream as he grabs their hands in his own, protectively holding them between his. "That's okay, buddy, we're both here. We'll be your eyes. You're - you're safe."

"I can't protect you," Dream turns his face toward George, and Sapnap can read how panicked and earnest he is even with the shirt in the way, "I can't fight, I can't -"

"You don't need to," George assures him, "When have I ever needed to be protected, hm? I can take care of myself."

Dream starts to hyperventilate.

"Hey," Sapnap tries, reaching up to hold Dream by the shoulders, not quite shaking him so much as rubbing his hands back and forth as he talks, "Dream, I need you to listen to me. Can you do that? It's important, okay? Can you do that?"

Dream nods, chest rising and falling rapidly.

"I know that this isn't the best time, but I just, I really need to ask you," Sapnap exchanges a glance with George, "Will you be my best man?"

Dream stops breathing, and so does George. He sees both Karl and Quackity freeze, too, and all five of them sit in dead silence for what feels like a small eternity before it's broken by a wheezing laugh.

"*What!?*" Dream chokes out, reaching out for Sapnap and landing a hand on his arm, which he clings to as he repeats, "*What?*"

"I've been thinking about it, ever since we talked." Sapnap continues as George slowly turns to stare holes into him. He shrugs helplessly because, well, it fucking worked, didn't it?

"And *now* seems like the right time to ask?" Dream demands. "Sapnap, I've just been fucking maimed."

"Don't be selfish, Dream, this isn't about you," Sapnap hesitates and then adjusts his grip and tugs, "Sit up so we can talk about this, George needs to wrap your face."

"Okay?" Dream responds, voice still shaky, but he sits up, slowly and carefully with Sapnap's support.

"So, I'm thinking you can be my best man and George can be Quackity's, and then Karl can ask someone from his guild." Sapnap starts to ramble, hoping that he can ride the distraction for long enough that George can wrap Dream's wounds without him continuing to panic. "I -

I thought about just having you two being the ring bearer and flower boy, but we've got all those plans. What do you think?"

"Me?" Dream clutches at Sapnap's arm, "I - sure? Yes?"

"Oh, man, that's perfect," Sapnap holds both of Dream's hands as George carefully pulls the shirt from his face. Dream winces, a low moan of pain escaping as blood continues to trickle from the gashes, and Sapnap is quick to continue, to keep Dream talking.

"C-color schemes," Sapnap starts, "Do you remember our first argument, Dream?"

George takes the stripes from Karl, folds them over until he has a rectangle of thick padding and then leans forward to press them over Dream's face, careful of how he places it to avoid covering his nose.

"I know, Dream, I know, shhh," George comforts, voice tender as Dream whimpers at the painful touch.

"I remember." Dream swallows, voice rough. "It was about color schemes."

"You said we both couldn't use blue in our weddings." Sapnap encourages. "You said that blue was George's color so I couldn't use it since you two already would be."

"Do you want blue?" Dream asks, hands clasping so tight to Sapnap's arm that he feels his bones ache. The pain is easy to bear, as Quackity starts to wrap bandages around the cloth covering Dream's face. George takes over almost immediately, face focused as Sapnap talks.

"No," Sapnap holds Dream's hand over his arm, "No. I think we'll want something calmer. What do you think of pink?"

"For a wedding?" Dream starts to shake his head but George's firm grip on his chin stops him, so he continues verbally. "No. Maybe lavender and a soft yellow. You can have lavender and daffodil bouquets."

"I'll grow some." Quackity joins in, "Dream, you can help. We'll dry them out and they can be keepsakes for the guests."

"Forever flowers to remind people of the occasion," Karl agrees, nodding even though Dream can't see him.

"What about food, though?" Sapnap muses, "Should we cook?"

"We'll have to, if we do it at home." Dream flexes his hand under Sapnap's as he talks, working the stress and pain out as George wraps the last of the bandages and ties them off tightly.

The white completely obscures the top half of Dream's face. The only reason Sapnap knows that he can breathe through his nose is his confidence that George wouldn't have overlooked it. Already, pale pink is bleeding through.

“We can hire Mister Nook,” Quackity offers, “What do you think, Dream?”

Dream hums in agreement. “He’s a good cook.”

“I’ll make the cake.” George proposes, and Sapnap knows it’s just to make Dream laugh. He doesn’t get a laugh, but the next huff is more out of amusement than pain.

“I’ll help you.” Dream offers, and then his face drops. “I can’t help you right now.”

“Are we calmer?” Sapnap asks, “Before we start talking about what’s happening here?”

“Did you make me think about your wedding decor to distract me from wound care?” Dream responds with a question of his own, still sounding a bit strangled, but at least no longer on the cusp of blacking out from asphyxiation from hyperventilating. “Did you call me *selfish*?”

“You called me selfish first,” Sapnap defends himself, the tail end of adrenaline the only thing keeping him up with Dream calmer and his wounds covered, “You started with the name calling, I’m not taking the fall for that right now.”

“I -” Dream starts, and then lets go of Sapnap to reach up and gently touch his fingers to the bottom of the bandages, “O-ouch,”

“Yeah, ouch,” George says, slapping Dream’s hand from his face, “D-don’t touch it, don’t -”

George’s voice breaks. He breathes in sharply in what Sapnap knows he would get punched for calling a sob.

“Sorry,” Dream says automatically, “George, I’m sorry, I’m -”

“Stop.” George’s breathing stutters again. To Sapnap’s immense dread, he can hear tears in his voice.

“Don’t cry,” Quackity begs, “George, if you cry, I’m going to cry,”

“If George cries, Dream will cry, and that is going to suck for him right now,” Karl points out, but his voice wobbles, too.

“Maybe we all just need to cry.” Sapnap admits, his own eyes starting to burn. The fear, the guilt, the anger, the exhaustion - it’s all just coalescing.

Sapnap doesn’t know what to do. Sapnap never has any fucking idea what to do. Sapnap feels like he’s just a big fucking stick; he’s good for wacking people, not for thinking. He’s upset, he’s frightened, he feels hopelessness starting to creep into him from the edges. With Dream’s eyesight gone and feeling so out of reach, and George breaking down, Karl bordering on a complete transformation, and Quackity having chosen to follow them even though he had an entire kingdom at his fingertips if he’d decided that it was easier to put up with Wilbur instead of Sapnap and Karl, Sapnap *doesn’t know what to do*.

He snuffles and George turns his glare on him. His eyes are wet, big and brown and seemingly more annoyed than upset as they well up.

“No,” George says menacingly, sniffing harder, “No, you dick, it’s my turn! It is *my turn* to have a fucking break down, all of you keep it together for *one fucking minute*, gods damn it!”

“Okay,” Dream agrees, but he’s a sympathy crier and he’s in pain and he’s probably just as scared and hopeless as Sapnap feels, if not worse, so his voice wavers when he says it.

“This is your fault,” George reaches up to scrub at his eyes, giving up and just pressing his palms to them as he tilts his head back, “This is all your stupid fault, both of you!”

“I know.” Dream says miserably.

“This is *not* the time or the place for arguments!” George continues to rant, but his voice keeps breaking and his breathing is uneven as he cries, “You could have died! Either of you! Any of you!”

“I’m sorry.” Sapnap says, ashamed, as he looks down. Tears escape his eyes, too, and he’s finally cool enough that they don’t steam away. His flame is too tired for that sort of work right now. He’s tired.

“You should be!” George reaches over and smacks him and Sapnap sees his scrunched eyes and red nose, both running until George covers them up again, “Idiots! Absolute fools, both of you! Are you c-crazy!? Do you w-want to die!?”

“No,” Dream answers, sniffing again, and then hovering a hand over his face uselessly as he winces, “O-ow, fuck,”

“Yeah! That’s what happens!” George sobs, smacking at Dream this time, “That’s what you get for saying awful fucking things to us!”

“I don’t think he meant it like that,” Quackity tries to defend Dream, rubbing at his eyes quickly. He looks equally as miserable as Sapnap feels when Sapnap looks at him, Karl’s arm around his shoulders as they both try to hide their own tears.

“It doesn’t matter how he meant it,” George snaps, “It was awful to say that you don’t want us with you! Wh-what the f-fuck, Dream?”

“I -” Dream’s shoulders draw up, head bowing, “I don’t want you here. I don’t want any of you here. I want you *safe*. But I...I always *want* you with me. I didn’t mean it like that. I always want you guys with me.”

“And you!” George turns his smacks on Sapnap and they don’t hurt physically, but each one is a blow Sapnap knows he deserves and that makes them heavy, the anguish behind them turning them into stinging welts.

“I told you to go *easy* on him!” George demands. “I *told* you this was hard on him!”

“I know.”

“Is telling him he’s turning into an evil mastermind going easy on him, Sapnap!?”

“No...”

“No, it isn’t!”

“He’s right, though,” Dream cuts in, “He’s right, I’ve been a dick to you guys.”

“You have!” George agreed immediately, “You really fucking have! Both of you have been complete assholes the entire fucking time and I can’t play fucking referee for you two, and I can’t play Karl’s fucking executioner, and -”

“Karl’s *what?*” Quackity interrupts, Sapnap’s own eyes snapping back up to George in shock.

Karl winces and says, “Did we need to bring that up, George?”

“Yes! Because it was shitty and fucking awful and I’m sick of you all being shitty and fucking awful!”

“*What* are you talking about?” Quackity looks between both Karl and George, and then to Sapnap, as if he knows anything

“Karl asked George to take him out if he transformed.” Dream admits, and Karl turns an accusing glare on him.

“That isn’t -” Karl starts, but Sapnap is speaking over him before he can try to obfuscate.

“You did *what?*” He asks, though he knows that there’s more fear in him than anger at this point.

“I -” Karl tries, but then Quackity just has to blink at him, more tears on his cheeks, face a mask of pain, and he breaks.

“I wanted to spare you two,” Karl whispers. “When - *If* I turn. I didn’t know that this would happen, that I’d just need to win some stupid trial to be free. I thought... I really thought I was going to turn in the Nether, and I just wanted to make sure it wouldn’t have to be either of you two to put me out of my misery.”

“You didn’t think we’d save you?” Quackity asks, hurt, echoing Sapnap’s thoughts.

“Oh, angel,” Karl wilts, carefully cupping Quackity’s cheek and wiping his tears, “I knew you’d try. I knew that you’d both try, even past the point when I was worth saving. I just... I’m dangerous. It’s dangerous being next to me. If I hurt one of you...”

“You wouldn’t.” Sapnap says fiercely.

“I might.” Karl admits, pained. “I might, and that’s not a risk I’m willing to take. So I asked George to make sure that it wasn’t the two of you.”

“And I told you to fuck off.” George spits. “Like I’m telling all of you, right now, to fuck off with this - this hopeless bullshit. We’re going to win this trial, and we’re going to go home.”

Why is it so hard for all of you to just fucking believe that? When have we ever failed each other, huh? Tell me, so I can figure out if I'm the fucking idiot here or if it's you lot!"

"You aren't an idiot." Quackity swallows. "I believe you."

"I want to believe you." Karl says after opening his mouth and closing it a few times, like a fish. "So, so damn bad, George, I want to believe you."

"So just do it." George rubs his face roughly one last time and then turns his sharp gaze on all of them, only Dream spared from the daggers. "We're going home. Say it."

"We're going home." Quackity echoes immediately, using his sleeve to dry his face.

Karl opens his mouth, but nothing comes out.

George turns to Sapnap. "Say it."

"We're going home." Sapnap gives in, the words practically whispered.

"Dream, say it." George demands and Sapnap sees Dream swallow.

"We're going home." He says after clearing his throat, voice shot.

"Karl," George crosses his arms. "I'm a king and I'm part of your advisorship during this dumb trial. You have to listen to me, or it's going to start an interdimensional incident. Do you or do you not respect my council?"

"Of course I do." Karl starts, brows furrowed, "I do. I respect you. You're the only king I'd ever willingly follow."

"Good." George smacks Dream's leg for emphasis, much to Dream's chagrin, "Then believe me and say it. It isn't a lie if you believe it. We're going home. We're going to beat this dumb maze, we're going to reverse the transformation, and we're going to leave this fucking realm and go home, and we're staying there because that is where we belong. Because I said so, and I get what I fucking want. So say it."

Karl watches George, eyes wide and mouth lax as George demands his belief.

It reminds Sapnap of that moment during the coup, when George had stood over the destroyed throne, Nightmare dead in his hands. He'd looked so much like a king in that moment, Sapnap had been a little bit enthralled.

Sapnap is enthralled now. He believes the words, just enough. He believes because the way George stares at Karl demands nothing less than his belief. There's a reason that Sapnap dedicated his life to this man, even when he'd been so young, and it's because of moments like this.

Sometimes, George is kind of cool.

“We’re going home.” Karl says, blinking as he says the words, and they sound kind of wondrous, as if he can’t quite believe them even as he says them.

“Exactly.” George reaches out and nudges Karl, right above his heart. “You said it, so it isn’t a lie.”

“But how?” Sapnap asks, though he hates to do it. “Dream’s blind, now. I’m all burnt out, at least until I get some rest, and I’m pretty sure my entire upper body is bruised to the bone. I know you guys don’t need brawn to do *everything*, but we’re both pretty much burdens, right now.”

“I don’t know.” George sniffs. “I’m a king, not a councilman. I execute ideas, I don’t come up with them. That’s Dream’s job.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m concussed right now.” Dream admits.

“Luckily, this council has a few other members.” George looks around. “Well? Regale us with ideas, anyone.”

“If that thing,” Quackity motions to the body of the monster, “Took out even most of that group it was with, I think that’s...that’s most of the people that we came with. We’ve seen a lot of bodies.”

“I’ve been counting.” Karl confesses. “If it killed that whole group, then around forty-one people have died. I can’t be sure, obviously, but my last count at the Court was fifty-seven. That leaves about sixteen people running around, but there are plenty of places they could be. In the pit with those guys, or lost in the corridors we didn’t go down. Ahead of us, even.”

Transformed and prowling the maze, maybe.

“Fuck.” Sapnap mutters and then straightens up under George’s warning glare.

“Positivity *only* right now, Sapnap.”

“It’s hard,” Sapnap admits out loud, “I wish we could just fucking climb over the walls.”

“Me, too.” Quackity sighs. “That would be safer. We could just walk on top, all the way to the end.”

“If these useless things actually worked...” Karl mutters and flexes the bones on his back.

“We could maybe get two of us up there,” George theorizes, “But I think it’s too high up to get us all up there. Someone would get left behind.”

“We’d just need one of us up there,” Dream says carefully. “Sap, that’s kind of genius. One of us goes up, drops a rope. We could all climb up.”

“The only problem is...” George says and points up. Sapnap looks up and watches as, in the hazy dark red of the sky, a living flame slowly floats by. Another joins it and they disappear from view. They hadn’t caused a problem during the entire time they were in the maze, even

when they'd drifted close to the tops of the walls, but Sapnap realizes why they wander, now. What they're supposed to guard against.

"The blazes." Dream says without needing to see them.

"The blazes." Karl agrees.

"I could do it." Sapnap volunteers. "The fire wouldn't hurt me, probably."

"That's a really risky 'probably,'" George hesitates, but Sapnap is already forming the idea in his mind.

"If it's bad, I'll just jump down. You guys can break my fall."

"I'll always catch you when you fall." Karl says solemnly, but his lips twitch and Sapnap finds himself smiling before he can stop it. It feels like a straight shot of relief directly to his blood, warming it where it had begun to chill from exhaustion and fear.

"I know." He says and sees Karl's smile form, too.

"Sapnap could lead us." Dream says suddenly, voice brightening. "If the blaze don't bother you much, you can scout ahead and lead us through or warn us if anyone's ahead."

"I could do that." Sapnap looks between them, the plan solidifying in his brain and finally giving him some stability. "I could do that, oh shit. I could lead us out."

"How do we get you up there, though?" Quackity looks up at the nearest wall and Sapnap does, too. From where the five of them are all kneeling on the rough ground, it does look impossible to reach the top.

"It'll be a balancing act." George frowns. "But if Dream is at the bottom, and then Karl, and then me, you could climb up us."

"There's no way Dream could keep you both up," Sapnap frowns, "He's..."

Sapnap trails off, glancing at Dream, who's facing him. Even without being able to see his eyes, he wants to quell under the look he knows he's being sent just by the severe turn of his lips.

"Injured." he finishes lamely.

"My arms are fine." Dream says, a bit icily, "I can carry all four of you, if I need to."

"You don't." George says hurriedly. "Just two of us, and Sapnap for a few seconds as he climbs up. Quackity, you're going to have to spot us because if Sapnap has to jump, I might fall, and if I fall, I'm going to be fucking furious."

"Aren't you scared of heights, though?" Quackity asks and George crosses his arms tighter.

“No. I have a *reasonable concern* about being high up on someone’s shoulders. But I *am* scared of spending the rest of my life in this ugly maze, so I’ll bite my tongue and do this if it means we leave. Come on.”

George stands and Sapnap gets to his feet hurriedly, Karl and Quackity quick to follow. It leaves only Dream on the ground. Standing over him, Sapnap realizes how small Dream looks right now, his tanned face pale under the bandages.

If Sapnap is on the wall, he won’t be able to be with them down here. He won’t be able to be with Dream when he’s hurt.

He bites the inside of his cheek, tries not to hover as Dream tries to stand.

He gets his feet under him, but he’s unsteady as he pulls himself into a kneel.

“I’ll help,” Sapnap offers, but Dream waves him off as he slowly straightens his legs out. Sapnap doesn’t touch, but he doesn’t step away, either, and he’s glad for it when Dream almost immediately sways into a stumble the second he’s got his knees over a ninety-degree angle.

“I think I’m going to throw up,” Dream says under his breath and Sapnap, taking quite a bit of his weight, winces.

“Try not to do it on me,” he says, steadying Dream as he finds his balance.

He’s got a concussion. If Sapnap had been optimistic about that before, that hope is dead and he’s sure about that fact now. Dream is having trouble just standing. How the fuck is he going to hold Karl and George up?

“Dream...” George says, and he doesn’t need to continue.

“I can do it.” Dream puts a hand to his head and visibly forces himself to stand up tall. “I can do it, guys.”

“We can keep walking.” Karl offers. “I know it’s not worked out yet, but we made it this far. We can just keep trial and error-ing.”

“No.” Dream puts a hand out, “Someone give me my sword.”

Oh, shit, their swords. Sapnap looks around wildly, suddenly very aware that he doesn’t have Schlorg at his side. It’s an immediate relief when Quackity kneels again and picks the blade up, bringing it to Sapnap while Karl goes to retrieve Nightmare.

With their swords returned, Dream returns Nightmare to the sheathe, no hesitation in the movement despite the lack of sight.

“Take me to the wall. We’ll use it to support ourselves.”

George comes to Sapnap’s side while Karl and Quackity lead Dream to one of the walls.

“This might not work.” Sapnap says quietly, ducking his face close to George’s.

“If it doesn’t, then Karl is right. We’ll trial and error until we reach the end.” George says firmly. But his eyes shift to Dream, and concern leaks through the mask.

“If something happens,” Sapnap hesitates, trying to figure out how he wants to say this. “If something happens, don’t hesitate. Pick him. Okay?”

“I’m not picking either of you.” George turns a heated glare on him, “Damn it, Pandas,”

“George.” Sapnap hardens his own voice, needing George to understand. “I can’t go up there if I don’t know that you won’t put your all into making sure he’s safe. He’s blind, and he’s concussed, and he’s half fucking starved. Please, for me, just promise me that you’ll keep him safe.”

“Of course I will,” George snaps. “Of course I will. You know I will.”

“Don’t worry about me. Don’t worry about Karl and Quackity. We can all take care of ourselves. Just focus on him. Okay?”

George’s lips flatten out again, but he gives in and nods.

“He’s safe with me.” George says, and Sapnap knew that, but it feels good to hear it, too.

When they join the others at the wall, Quackity has returned Dream’s cloak to him.

“The enchantments will help,” Karl is saying, “There’s one for general wellness, so it should help with any pain, a little, and keep you stable, if the worst happens.”

“What isn’t on this cloak?” Dream smiles wanly, “Thanks, Karl.”

“Thank me by not dropping me, big guy,” Karl pats his elbow. “Ready?”

Dream nods and turns to face the wall. He puts his hands out, flattens them against the rough, twisting rock of the walls and then carefully puts himself against it, legs spread shoulder width, palms flat.

“Okay.” He says, breathing out slowly. “Go on, Karl.”

Karl looks at Dream, and then the others, worried.

George nods at him encouragingly and Karl hesitates for only a second longer before he puts his hand on Dream’s shoulder. Sapnap helps to boost him up and Dream shifts, just once, as Karl puts the weight of a foot on his shoulder, hunkering down as Karl pushes up. It pulls him out of Sapnap’s hands as he climbs and Sapnap looks up, watching worriedly as Karl balances on Dream’s shoulders and the wall.

“My turn.” George glares up, as if the wall had personally wronged him. “Get ready, guys!”

“Ready!” Karl and Dream chorus, Dream more strained.

“Boost?” George asks Sapnap and Sapnap nods, hands going to George’s hips to help.

Dream doesn’t buckle under the new weight, but Sapnap *hears* his teeth gritting as George, too, leaves Sapnap’s hands in his climb. George is slow in his ascent, careful in every place he puts his foot, in every place he pulls himself up so he doesn’t knock them off balance.

“How are you doing, Dream?” Quackity asks as George piggy-backs Karl and worms his way to his shoulders. Sapnap sees George’s legs shaking, sees how hard he digs his hands into the merciless rock of the wall and how Karl coaxes him to get his feet on his shoulders.

“Fine.” Dream grunts, and they leave him be.

“Ready!” George calls from on-high, voice shaky.

Quackity looks at Sapnap.

“Please don’t fall.” He says and Sapnap nods sharply. He starts forward and then stops, thinking. He strips off his armor.

“That isn’t -” Quackity starts but then cuts himself off, biting his lip.

“Help me up?” Sapnap asks when all of the diamond is off, a good twenty pounds lighter now, and Quackity laces his fingers together to help Sapnap start.

Dream is trembling when Sapnap gets a foot on his shoulder next to Karl’s.

“You’re sure?” Sapnap can’t help but check before he puts any weight down.

“Go.” Dream snarls, and Sapnap goes.

He feels Dream shift under his foot but it’s the work of only half a second before he’s rebalanced.

“H-here,” Karl says, bringing Sapnap’s attention to his locked hands. He’s facing outward, as opposed to both Dream and George facing the wall, and he isn’t holding George’s ankles; instead, he’s cupped his fingers together low enough for Sapnap to get a foot in them.

“Oh, fuck,” Sapnap says, stomach swooping, “We’re idiots. We’re fucking idiots. We’re such idiots.”

He almost sings the words as he fits his foot into Karl’s hands and pulls himself up with a hand on Karl’s shoulder and another on George’s waist, fingers digging tight into his clothes.

George is practically hugging the wall, tight enough that it’s scraped up his hands and, no doubt, his face. His eyes are squeezed shut when Sapnap is high enough to see his face, one foot on Karl’s shoulder and the other raised in the air, unsure of where to be placed.

“I don’t -” he starts, beginning to panic, but he forces himself to breathe in for seven seconds and then out for eleven, find the calm inside.

“I don’t know where to put my foot.” he says, pressed tight to George’s back. It’s the first time he’s been grateful for Karl’s new features, because he knows that the only way he and George are both being supported by his lover right now is because of otherworldly influences.

“I - um,” George stutters, fear making his voice high. “Sh-shimmy up, maybe? Like you’re trying to get on my back, and then push up on my shoulders.”

“Will you be able to handle me?”

“I’ll have to!”

With a good point being made, Sapnap hefts himself up on George’s shoulders, squeezing his sides between his knees and then dragging himself up slowly, inch by inch, by wiggling his way up. His arms strain, his wrists shaking under the unsteady pressure of George’s shoulders. He sees blood well on George’s fingers as he digs them into the rough wall. Sapnap’s own face scrapes against it as he works his way up and he closes his eyes against it, managing to get one knee on one shoulder, and then another knee on the other.

He has to stop, reassess. He feels how delicately the four of them are held up right now.

“You can do it!” He hears Quackity shout from below. “Sapnap, keep going!”

“I’m going to cry again, dude,” he admits, because he knows only George can hear him.

“Cry about it when you get up there, idiot,” George grits out, “Hurry up and get *off*, I can’t do this for much longer!”

Sapnap looks up. He’s just...just too low.

“Steady on the right!” He warns, raising his voice, and then carefully leans his weight onto this right knee so he can get his left foot onto George’s shoulder.

“Steady on the left!” He warns again, and then shifts to get his right foot under him, too.

He slowly straightens up, knees wobbly until he locks them in place. He reaches his hands up. The very tips of his fingers touch the top of the wall.

“*Fuck.*”

“What?” George demands, “What’s wrong?”

“I have to jump!”

“*What?*”

“I have to *jump!*” He shouts back down, “Ready?”

“Gods damn it, gods damn it, gods damn it -” He hears George chant.

“Jump!” he hears Dream shout, distant.

Sapnap bends his knees as best he can, reaches his arms up, fingers spread as far as he can get them.

He feels his body start to tilt back into open air.

He jumps.

His fingers catch the edge of the wall, bitterly bitten by the rock.

George screams, high and shrieking, and Sapnap looks over his shoulder, stomach dropping as he watches George tip off Karl’s shoulders with pinwheeling arms.

“George!” He can’t help but scream - but Karl catches George, lurching off of Dream’s shoulders and wrapping his arms around George and then the boney wings so they’re almost caged by the appendages.

They hit the ground with twin shrieks, rolling shortly before going still.

Sapnap’s fingers ache, but he can’t take his eyes off them.

“Guys!?” Dream demands, stepping forward and then freezing, hands coming up to feel the space around him uselessly, “George!?”

Quackity drops at their side, helpless, until one bony wing lifts and Karl flops over.

“We’re okay!” George pops up, “We’re okay! Sapnap, what are you doing!? This isn’t a fucking climbing frame!”

“I was *worried*, you fucking *dick*!” Sapnap spits down at them, and then turns his attention back to the wall.

His fingers are warm with blood. His shoulders ache, his arms strain. His chest hurts, his flame demanding rest, but Sapnap pushes past all of that. If he falls, he has no doubt that he will shatter his legs from ankle to knee.

He wriggles against the wall, letting go of the surface with one hand and taking the pressure on his still-clinging fingers to throw a better grip up. He yanks himself up, first a forearm, and then both, and then his bicep, and then the other. It’s an undignified wiggle, worming his way up, but he does it.

The wall isn’t wide enough for him to collapse completely, but he turns to lay along the top, letting his arms and legs flop over the sides and resting his face on the cold, rough stone under him.

“Sapnap?” Dream asks, voice concerned, “Are you okay!?”

“Yeah!” He yells. “I made it! I fuckin’ made it!”

He laughs, hysterical, and hears his disbelieving cackling echoed below in their own voices. A blaze floats by, locking red-coal eyes on him. He stares back, caught lying flat on the wall with no armor and no drawn weapon.

He pushes his flame, nudging it until it burns just enough that he can produce heat in his palms; enough that they start to spark and pop.

The blaze pops back, and continues to float on.

“I’m a fire demon.” he says to himself in dizzy relief. “I’m a blaze hybrid. These are, like, my aunts and uncles times a hundred. Fuck yes. *Fuck* yes. I’m so cool.”

He gives himself just a second, just a second to feel the relief, to *breathe*.

And then he stands up, careful not to fall, and peers over the edge. George has gone to Dream, their arms around each other as they cling tightly. Karl has shouldered the enderchest and he holds Quackity’s hand, the both of them gazing up at the wall where Sapnap now stands. He waves at them. They wave back.

“Ready?” He asks, and he sees Quackity’s thumbs up.

It’s time to beat this fucking maze.

It should be hard.

Even with Sapnap on the wall, it should still be hard. His gut and his brain and his instincts and his past experience and everything about this situation tell him that this shouldn’t have been the shortcut that removed the awfulness of it all.

But it is. It’s easy, after everything.

Sapnap scouts ahead, occasionally needing to make a daring leap from one wall to another, and shouts directions down. The blaze don’t bother him, but do occasionally try to bump against him until he ducks low to avoid getting his clothes caught on fire. The others listen to his call-outs. Dream is slow, growing dizzier and slower by the hour, but ultimately willing to push through with George under one arm and Quackity under the other while Karl guards their front with his staff.

They don’t run into anyone else, except for a single person; and that person flees at the sight of their party, disappearing down a passageway that Sapnap can see is long but ends, ultimately, with another wall.

Sapnap finds the right path. They only get lost one time and it’s an easy back-track.

When the exit comes into view, Sapnap feels more tears on his cheeks but he doesn’t bother brushing them off.

“I see it.” He shouts down to the others. “We’re almost there!”

The last two halls, the final three turns, Sapnap has never focused more sharply before in his life, it feels like. He scans the corridors, pacing all the way to the end and then back, over and over, as he looks for threats.

None appear. When they all turn the last corner, he sees Karl's knees physically give out. Sapnap wants to jump off the wall, float down to him, and kiss him, fangs and all.

"We did it." George says, looking from Dream to Sapnap and back, voice loud enough for Sapnap to hear him. "We did it!"

"Now, we just need to get Sapnap down." Quackity points out, but it's quick work, a controlled fall. Sapnap lowers himself down, his shirt riding up and his back scraping painfully along the merciless rock as he slides down - Quackity and George are waiting to catch him when they can reach they end up in a pile, holding tight to each other, Karl and Dream leaning on each other close by. Sapnap feels his shredded back seeping warmth into his shirt but, through the relief, he barely feels the pain.

"We did it." Sapnap says, feeling almost crazy from the relief. His fall wasn't graceful and his entire body aches from it, especially one of his arms, but it's nothing more than a nasty sprain and he doesn't care about that right now.

"We did it." Karl agrees, voice awed.

The exit is, much like the entrance, a thin line of glow stone and a portal.

They pause only long enough for Sapnap to fight his armor back into place, the sting of the new scrapes barely noticeable in his hurry. After, the five of them pass the glow stone and stop at the portal.

"Hopefully this is our last portal." Quackity says as they all take in the swirling purple and dark obsidian.

"Second to last." George corrects. "We still need the portal back to Kinoko."

"I'll take it." Karl breathes out slowly. "However many more we need before we can leave, I'll take."

"Ready?" Sapnap looks at all them, eyes lingering on Dream. He's pale, and sweaty even through the bandages. Red has stained through the padding and the white gauze. He's pulled his cloak tight around himself, swaying gently even with George holding onto him tightly.

He needs medical attention or a healing potion. Sapnap doesn't know how much longer they can go without at least one of those things.

"I've been ready for forever," Karl admits and steps up to the portal. Sapnap, heart hammering with concern and excitement, follows him.

Karl is glad for the relief. It drowns out a lot, helps quieten the spinning in his head; the fear, the call that is starting to re-awaken. The disturbing thoughts that he has been ruminating

over ever since they killed the beast.

When Quackity swung that sword and the head of the monster rolled to a gory stop at Karl's feet, he'd recognised the face of the person it had once been. He doesn't know if the others realized, and he doesn't want to ask. He's okay with this being a burden that he alone has to bear, and he can live with that, for however long he has left to live.

It was a mercy kill, even if Karl's thoughts hadn't been of mercy when he'd attacked. Karl doesn't think about brothers lain to rest in bloody hallways, and revenge taken when it was already too late. He holds on tight to Quackity, and he focuses on the fact that somehow, this will all be over soon. George might actually be right. They'll get home.

The portal takes them back to the courtyard. Last time they were here, there were strays everywhere. Now, there is only what was left behind in the impromptu teleport; bags and tents and little lean-to's, still-smoking cooking pots and beds. All empty. All gone.

Instead of those husks hiding in the shadows and blocking the way into the Empress's palace, they line up in the light, a morbid path watching impassively as the five of them limp their way up the blindingly white steps.

"You'd think she'd make more of an effort for the winner," Quackity mutters as they struggle up the stairs, and Karl has to bite back a laugh. Sapnap holds himself stiffly as he and George support Dream's woozy, swaying form up each step, which Karl knows from experience means that he's in a lot of pain, and Dream is - well. Karl, once again, tries to ignore the guilt. Dream is alive, for now. That is enough, until they can escape.

At the top of the stairs sit a heavy pair of double doors, guarded by, much to Karl's horror, two of the monsters that Karl knows he may have ended up as, if he'd failed. They're silent, staring sightlessly ahead of them, standing tall with their bony protrusions spread. A thin red film has formed between the bones, filling it out into a proper wing.

As the five of them approach, the monsters each grab one handle and heave. The doors swing open, and the Court of the Inbetween greets them.

Like the Other Side, the throne room of this Court is massive and aching empty. This time, at least, the Court has actually shown up. Unlike the Allay, the Vex watch from the sidelines as they step inside. It sends shivers of distaste up Karl's spine.

The Empress sits upon her throne. She does not look massive, as Kristin did. Instead, she seems almost tiny in her giant throne, dwarfed by the falling lava at her back. Despite the size, she controls the room so obviously that Karl can't help but be impressed. General disdain for royalty or not, Karl appreciates a good dramatic moment and she's set up quite the show.

Long-robed figures stare impassively in complete silence as they make their way down the glowstone path towards the throne. Every handful of yards, a husk stands guard, swords drawn and raised high in an arch for them to pass through, but most of the audience are the masked, floating Vex. The only individuality Karl can find as he looks closely at them are the masks they wear; the same porcelain as XD had worn, but each a different marking, no two

the same. Runes, in some cases, or letters, or just a coat of arms. Karl doesn't know what dictates the marking on each mask and if he was here for any other reason, he would be utterly intrigued. Right now, he doesn't care. Right now, he focuses his eyes on the throne ahead of them, and the goddess that sits upon it.

Karl is getting real fucking sick of all the thrones that have been popping up in his life in the last couple years.

The Empress isn't smiling, as they approach.

She holds her staff, made out of what looks like molten gold, shifting but still solid. The room is already hushed but, as they close the last part of the space and stop at the base of her dias, it somehow falls into a deeper silence. Karl doesn't know whether he should kneel as a peasant or visiting gentry would, or bow as a prince might, or do nothing, as the jester he feels he is. He does at least avert his eyes as he nods his head.

There is a weight to her gaze upon him that he doesn't like, an expectation.

"Your Majesty," he says respectfully.

"Karl Jacobs," She replies, and the voice echoes around the room, bouncing from the walls and reverberating until it rests back at her feet, all attention drawn to her, "You have completed the trial."

"I have." Karl agrees.

"Your wit has served you well." She glances across the five of them. "Your retinue remains intact. Impressive. You have proven that you are worthy of the magic bestowed upon you, and that you are deserving of the reward that was promised."

Home, he thinks.

Home, his soul sings.

"This trial has tested your determination, your bravery, and your resolve. You have proven you are no ordinary stray, and therefore, you shall be no ordinary Vex." The Blaze Empress intones, a ceremony to the words that makes Karl's stomach twist.

"Actually," he says weakly, but she speaks over him.

"Your ultimate reward, Karl Jacobs, shall be your heart's truest desire. The honor of a seat at my side."

Karl's stomach drops straight to his feet.

"Oh no," Quackity says, his face pale. His grip on Karl's arm goes weak, his legs buckling, though he doesn't fall.

"You shall be my heir, to ensure the future of this Court, and the protection of our people," The Empress declares, "Welcome home, my child, and congratulations. Step forward and

claim your birthright.”

Karl does not step forward. There is a single shift in the air, someone moving in the stillness. Karl feels the disturbance in his bones.

“That is...a very generous offer, your Majesty.” Karl starts, carefully. “One I appreciate. But I didn't come to your Court to earn it, I'm afraid. I came to make a deal. To reverse the transformation and return home. That is all.”

There is no audible sound, but it's like the entire court takes a breath at once, shocked and eager all at the same time. Interested in the drama. Shit, maybe these *are* his people.

The Empress' face is like stone as she gazes down at him, cherry-coal eyes blazing. “You're rejecting your prize, Vexling?”

“No!” Karl says, hurriedly, “No, not at all, rejection is such a harsh and certain thing, isn't it, Your Greatness? I'm not one to turn my nose up to generosity, let me assure you. I'm afraid I'm just not fit for the job, ma'am.”

He sees her lips press together.

"I'd beg you to reconsider your offer." He says, hoping it sounds reasonable. "A seat at the side of one as eternal as yourself, it's a prize far above a head as simple as mine. I ask only for the opportunity to make a deal and return to the simple life I had. I...I want only to be human again. I'm not one for the high life you so kindly offer."

“The power of the Court of the Inbetween, the power to gift life, would be in your hands,” The Empress says, her head tilting slowly. “You would be immortal, all-powerful, and would one day inherit these walls and the Vex that serve me for your own. And, instead, you wish to return to being...human?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Karl says, glad she understands.

Her brow twitches.

“And what, Vexling,” Her voice rings, compelling as her tone shifts to something akin to annoyed, “is so interesting to you about being human? What is more important than your people and your *home*?”

He feels the pull, and the truth of it is so strong that he can't stop it from rising out of him.

“My family,” spills out of his mouth, the truth he cannot hide behind pretty words, “They're worth more than the offer you make.”

“Your family,” The Empress leans forward, face still inscrutable except for that ticking brow, “Not your retinue?”

“We have a close working relationship.” He says hurriedly.

She scoffs.

"Your words are too quick. They lack for sweetness, Karl Jacobs. You'd do well to let them steep longer," the Empress looks away from him. Her eyes turn, instead, toward his friends. Karl feels the situation rapidly slipping from his fingers.

"I admit, my mouth tends to lead my brain more than the opposite," Karl says carefully. "I'd be dead hundreds of times over but for the ample grace of those in positions such as yours, who have the wisdom to recognize that I am more the fool than the scholar."

That, at least, gets a smile. Her eyes settle behind Karl, though, and the smile slips.

"Fool you may be, but I am *not*. I do not appreciate your tricks or your too-soon-served words."

Karl turns his head to see what has upset her and finds only Dream, standing between George and Sapnap with his hand loose on Nightmare's pommel and his face tight from pain.

He turns back to the Empress, feeling sick. He finds that she is looking at him again, eyes severe.

"You are not the first, nor will you be the last, to use your wit and words to find loopholes when we cannot speak falsehood." She stands, her staff shifting as she draws her shoulders back. "I will not fault you for your pretty words. It is the smell of rot that I find myself ill from."

"Rot, Your Majesty?" Karl anxiously shifts, sweat breaking out for the first time, feeling hot with nerves. "Ask it of me, Blaze Empress, and I will gladly be rid of what ails you. What have I said that is so egregious?"

"Your retinue." She lifts her staff and points, "I may let pass that they helped you in the trial, that your standing here is by the grace of their skills. No ruler can do it alone, I can admit. But to circumvent the *single rule* I set forth is too much, Vexling. It is a slight I won't allow, no matter your status as scholar or jester, or even my heir."

"*What?*" George speaks up, frustration exploding, "What do you -?"

"I don't," Karl cuts him off with a sharp motion, "I don't understand, Your Majesty. No rules were broken, I'm very sure of it! We didn't -"

"Didn't you?" The Empress says, "Even now, you stand and you *lie* in my Court?"

"I assure you that *no* member of your Court helped us in that damn maze, Your Majesty!" Karl says, losing his cool. "No offense, ma'am, but if I had a trick that made it possible for me to lie, I'd be doing a hell of a lot more with it than fibbing to your face!"

The Blaze Empress slams the butt of her staff to the ground, the sound echoing as murmurs pick up along the sides of the throne room.

"You stand at the side of my Warden and you utter these lies? Have you no shame, to be before your Empress and turn your nose up to my kindness and then break the sacred oath of this Court to speak true?"

Warden?

Karl turns around again, mouth falling open in shock.

Even blind, half his face covered in bandages, Dream looks horrified, stepping back, almost tripping over his own feet as he steps away from the throne.

"No," He spits, "*No*, I am *not* the Warden!"

"You think he's XD!?" Sapnap laughs incredulously, looking stricken.

"Did you think I would not recognise one of my Court? *You* took the title of Warden. You took your place as a Vex and then deserted your duties as a member of this Court, and you did not think that there would be consequences to that? To flagrantly return and aid a stray in a quest for power?"

"I didn't want that!" Dream says, "I just wanted to leave, I wanted to get out! I gave up that power, and I don't want a single speck of it, then or now! I am *not* a member of this Court!"

"*Want* does not come into this, child. It is a matter of fact." The Empress says, "The mask of the Warden fell to you. The power transferred to you. It waits, still, for you. By the law of this realm, you are of my Court. And no member of my Court was permitted to assist in this trial."

"Bullshit!" George shouts, "How were we supposed to know you considered a human man part of your damn nobility!?"

"Ignorance is not an excuse," The Empress says coldly, "And neither is rudeness. Yet, despite this, you completed my trial where all others have failed, and against all odds, the Warden has returned. I am merciful to my wayward subjects and lost children, in mind of the gifts they bring."

She opens her arms, and eyes each of them in turn.

"You are bound by the humans you profess to love, and by all the weakness that comes with those tainted by the Overworld. You refuse *me* in favor of your desire to remain with them, and..." Her voice softens, and he knows it's genuine when it turns pitying, "I understand, my Vexling. Humanity clings to you like chains, and I see that it pains you, to be torn between your rightful home and the ones you love. I have known the heartache of leaving those I cherish in the name of a powerful future. So I will offer you both, Karl Jacobs."

"Both?"

"I will forgive the slight against our Court and the treachery of the Warden, if you join me and accept your place. Both of you," She nods at Dream, "Immortality. No more wounds. No more pain. The End shall never touch you. Neither you," She smiles, "nor the ones you call kin."

Karl resists the urge to step in front of Sapnap and Quackity as her gaze slides to them each in turn.

"Child of the skies, condemned to the earth; with my gift, you could fly. Blaze-born, your soul calls to this very plane. You could be so much more than you know, with my power behind you. Lost king..." She lingers on George, his face scrunched, as if daring her to address him, "I could return your beloved to you. Your Warden. All I would ask in return is your loyalty. Your devotion to me and my Court. Continue to serve my heir as he adjusts to his new station."

"I don't need more," Sapnap speaks first, with all the formality of a knight trained to carefully navigate politics and royalty. "Just them. Always them. And not to offend, Your Majesty, but I have only ever bent my knee to one monarch, and he is beside me. I would never forsake my oath to him. I'm my king's knight before anything else."

Karl wishes that the swell of pride in his heart was enough to quell the fear.

"I don't need to fly," Quackity says, looking from Karl to Sapnap to the Empress, "I never have. My, uh, apologies, Your Majesty, but I like my wings as they are."

George bites at his lip, but his voice is strong when he speaks, and his hand is tight in Dream's.

"I would never, ever, give up Dream. Not as he is now. I want a future with him, a *human* future. Not one bound to another throne, if what I did to the last one wasn't clear enough."

"And you, wayward children?" The Empress asks, voice now made of steel, yet the hook of compulsion echoes out with her words, "Would you so easily forsake the generosity of a second chance?"

"I gave up that power," Dream insists, holding tight to George's hand, "I don't want it."

Karl, for perhaps the first time in his life, struggles to get his words out. His tongue feels wooden, slow with fear and overwhelmed with his love for his family. Part of him aches to stay, to agree, to just give in. The bones weigh his back down.

Sapnap and Quackity squeeze his hands and the weight lifts.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty," He says, finally. It's what he wants to say, in his heart of hearts, no matter what other forces scream at him, "I love them. I can't leave them. I promised."

"I see," The Empress says, and despite her appearance, her voice is like ice, "The chains that bind you to humanity are stronger than I had previously thought. And if you will not shed them yourselves, then I shall do it for you."

A shiver of fear jolts down Karl's spine.

"Your Majesty, I - "

"Seize the heir," She says, over them, to the husks standing guard at her side. "Apprehend the Warden. Kill the others. Their treachery disgraces our hospitality and they are not welcome in my Court."

"No!" Karl shouts, just as George does, just as Sapnap does. Dream draws his sword, Sapnap in sync with him and Karl watches as his knight slices through the first husk with utter ease.

But then comes a second. And a third. And a fourth. Dream has drawn Nightmare, but he doesn't swing with the blade; Karl doesn't understand why until he realizes that Sapnap and George are right next to him. Dream can't see; he doesn't know which body is Sapnap's or George's and which is an enemy. Instead of fighting, he stands stock still, Nightmare at the ready, as if trying to listen for which direction is safe.

They're down a fighter, and they would have been overwhelmed even with Dream and Sapnap both on their best game instead of half-dragging, blind, and bruised.

Karl scrabbles to keep a hold of Quackity, baring his teeth and free claws to the approaching attackers. There's no emotion in the husk's faces, nothing but blind obedience. Behind the husks are rows and rows of Vex, masked, watching silently.

Karl takes his eyes off the others for just a second, just long enough for him and Quackity to beat a husk back, but a loud cry draws his attention because it's *George*. He whips around, hand falling from Quackity's as he prepares for the worst.

One of the husks has grabbed for Dream, yanking him out of George's grip, as Dream desperately hacks at his aggressor with choppy, aborted stabs of a sword far too long for that kind of move. George lurches after them, but another husk intercepts, catching him around the waist and sending him back toward Sapnap with a sharp cry. Sapnap, being pulled at by three husks of his own, can only say, "*Don't touch him,*" as he tries to pull from his fight to rescue Dream.

Karl leaps across the feet between them, flinching back from Nightmare's thrust to dig his claws into the husk and rip away its arm. He pushes Dream back towards the others, trying to get him out of range of his own swinging arms, but Dream goes down with a shout instead, landing in a tumbled pile of diamond and sword and, Karl is pretty sure, blood loss.

Karl swipes blindly at the hands that grab at him. His blood *sings*; with the thrill of it, the delight of it, the taste of it. It calls to him, pulls him, threatens to drown him. Then, out of the corner of his eyes, he sees a smile curve on the Empress' face, and realizes; *this is what she wants*.

She wants him to give in, she wants him to be so close to the edge that saying yes to her is easier than defying her. Fuck that.

He bites down on the urge boiling in his blood, flexing his claws to try and fight back with as much control as possible, but the moment of reorienting himself has had consequences. One creature grabbing his arms is easy enough to throw off. Two more is a struggle. Five in total pins him completely to the floor, a knee on his spine, hands on his shoulders, more pinning his arms to his back with a merciless hold, holding his bone appendages down so he can't bat them off.

It gives him a perfect view of how the husks force their way between Sapnap and Quackity, both struggling to hold their own even without the sheer numbers of the husks adding more

of a challenge. He can only watch as George starts to run low on arrows, trying to protect both himself and reach Dream, still crumpled where Karl had thrown him.

“Let them go!” Karl snarls, “Fucking - let them go! They haven’t done anything!”

“They’ve done more than enough. Broken the rules of my home, spurned my hospitality, divided your loyalties.” The Empress says, “You are misguided, led astray by the humanity you yet refuse to free yourself from. There is no reason to deny your place at my side and you will see sense, when you’re ready. It is alright, my children. I will bring you home. Now be *silent*.”

The compulsion is stronger than any of the ones before. It seals his lips so tight he can’t even draw in air. Karl is stuck watching his friends fight for their lives. He’s done it before, he knows that they should be fine, but Sapnap is tired and Dream is blinded and they’re all fucking exhausted and Karl can’t do anything but watch.

Dream starts to rip at his bandages with one hand, and the moment the padding falls away, fresh blood immediately streaks his face, over his eyes as he yells in frustration. Karl sees him struggle to open them, to see through the blood, but the movement just re-opens what little clotting was able to happen from claw-marks so deep; it’s a cycle that Dream can’t defeat as he tries to rub the blood from his eyes to catch a glimpse of the world in chaos around him.

“I can’t see -” Dream says, practically begging on his knees, Nightmare held out in front of him uselessly in one bloody hand, the other pressed to his face, trying to stem the blood gushing between his fingers, red-stained bandages in a pile at his knees, “Guys!? *Guys!!*”

“It’s okay!” George says reassuringly, though he’s being beaten back by three husks, “We’re almost done! It’s almost over, just - just stay there a-and try to stay safe!”

“Sap?” Dream calls out, swiping Nightmare half-heartedly, too cautious to put his full might behind it when he can’t see his opponents.

Karl is torn; Quackity thrashes against a husk, his axe swinging wildly but obviously panicked, back to George, who looses arrow after arrow until he’s forced to pick up a discarded sword. Sapnap continues to lose ground against two husks with swords of their own who don’t even hesitate against his blows, trying desperately to make it to Dream. Karl rages against the hands holding him, but the husks don’t release him, gripping so tightly that he feels his bones close to breaking.

“We’re coming!” Sapnap shouts back at Dream as he’s nearly brought to the ground by a sword coming down against Schlong, “Stay there, we’re okay, we’re coming!”

“Enough.” The Empress says, sounding vaguely annoyed. “I’m tired of these games. End it.”

She snaps and -

Karl watches it in slow motion. He can’t do a single thing to stop it, straining uselessly against the husks pinning him down.

“No!” He thinks he shouts even through the compulsion, but the panic makes his throat close up and his breath come in hard huffs through his nose; his weak human heart freezing in terror as his voice is stolen from him by the overwhelming *fear*.

One moment, his friends are fighting and then the snap of two fingers and the fight is over. It’s silent, not even time for a scream. A husk puts a hand through Sapnap’s chest, its entire arm disappearing into him. Sapnap’s mouth falls open in shock, a quiet huff. He looks at the husk and then at Karl, face a mask of shock.

Karl watches the light dim in his eyes, his arms go slack. Schlong drops from his hand, clattering to the floor. Karl sees when his inner flame goes out, a gentle puff of smoke that escapes through his lax jaw. The tang of copper invades Karl’s nose, his mouth - it’s tantalizing and cloying. It makes his stomach churn and his mouth water.

“S-Sap -” Quackity manages to say, his entire body freezing in place, and then a husk is on him, hands around his throat with a sort of soft *crunch* that has his eyes rolling into the back of his head. The husk drops him and he crumples to the floor of the throne room like a marionette with its strings cut, his front to the floor. His head lolls at a strange angle, grotesque. His eyes stare and stare and see nothing at all, facing where Sapnap slumps against a stone-still husk.

Almost instantaneously to Quackity freezing, George’s body seems to lock up, a shocked-stupid stare as he takes in Sapnap impaled. Karl watches, numb, as a sword appears - right through the middle of George’s chest, eerily similar to where he’d been stabbed all that time ago in the fire swamp.

He drops his sword. Karl can’t speak. Can’t scream. Can’t breathe. He might as well have been impaled with George; his grief overflows, a gaping open wound. He watches as George slowly drops to his knees, blood tingeing his lips and then bubbling as he breathes wetly and spilling over his lips. With a *shink*, the sword is yanked from him, splattering Quackity’s lax body where it lay on the ground behind him. There’s blood already soaking into his feathers.

“George?” Dream says, voice weak and disbelieving, “G-George, please, I can’t - where - what’s going on?”

George turns to face Dream - yards away. Karl watches as, instead of clutching at his chest, he puts one hand to the ground and then the other. The angle encourages blood to flow and he leaves a thick trail, which pools obscenely where he’d fallen, soaking Quackity where it runs to him.

George is still for a long second, and then he puts his hand in front of the other, lifting his head to find Dream. Karl watches him pull himself forward inch by agonising inch. He sees George’s lips moving. He can’t compute what George is trying to say, he can’t compute - anything. He hears the whisper though, as George tries again.

“It’s okay,” George says, spitting a mouthful of red out as he drags himself closer to Dream.

“Sapnap?” Dream yells again; he doesn’t seem to have heard George, “Sap, what’s going on? I don’t - I don’t hear any fighting, what -”

George mouths the words again, reaching out for Dream. He's close, Karl watches the space disappearing between them as George tries to get to Dream, a desperation in his movements that George has never willingly shown before.

A husk ambles up, empty eyes unfeeling as it lifts a leg and stomps on George's back, sending him fully to the ground.

Dream's head whips around at the sound and he points Nightmare toward the husk and George.

Karl feels his body go limp, like his own strings have been cut. He thinks he's crying. He still can't say a word.

"George?" Dream lets Nightmare fall and waves his hand out slowly, ignoring the danger, "George, this isn't...please! Answer me! Sapnap? Quackity? K-Karl? Why can't I -"

"Dream..." George shapes the name, but no air gives his voice sound. Karl feels a cut off cry in his throat that doesn't even make it to his tongue as the husk lifts its sword and stabs downward. George jolts, a soft grunt escaping. He reaches a hand out, fingers stretching for Dream's, who continues to feel around in the air, giving up on stemming the blood to use both hands. He's too far up, though, and misses George's last-ditch attempt to grab his fingers. Karl watches George go slack, his hand dropping to join the rest of him where he lay on the ground, inches from Dream's knee.

Karl keens, wounded and broken and drenched in grief so sharp it is a sword in his own lungs. He feels a second away from shattering. He feels like he already has.

"Karl, is that *you*? Where are you?" Dream says, struggling to his feet. "George, where - Karl? Quackity? *Sapnap*?"

Karl tries to say something but he can't. Something is burning inside of him, starting at his core and trickling out, steadily faster and faster until it's nearly all-consuming. The blood rushes in his ears. The red begins to bleed over the last of his vision. He feels his teeth begin to elongate, saliva filling his mouth. A rage so hot it melts him starts in his toes and climbs its way up his body.

Dream stumbles forward, arms still feeling wildly for something to orient with.

"Please," He begs, no strength left in his voice, as if he knows he's fighting the truth of it but he can't stop, "Please, someone answer me. George, please, *please*,"

"Be at peace, Warden." The Empress says, "It is time to come home."

"Sapnap," Dream says, ignoring her, and then in a scream full of the sort of agony that Karl feels, "*Sapnap, answer me!*"

No one answers. No one moves. There are none left living to do so. Karl watches Dream's toe nudge against George's body as he inches forward. Dream goes still. The husk with a foot on George's back doesn't move, watching Dream silently.

“What is that?” Dream nudges George’s body again, voice growing more frantic, “What is that?”

Karl begins to growl. It’s subsonic, at first, shaking the air more than making soundwaves, but it quickly grows to match that rage inside of him, a soft purr that turns into a dull roar.

Dream drops to his knees, hands finding George’s body and patting fraughtly. He goes still when he chances upon George’s hair. His hands lower, trace down, to find George’s face. Blood stains the pale skin; it could be Dream’s, it could be George’s. It doesn’t matter. George is limp and lifeless.

“George.” Dream says. “George? George.”

Karl loses the last of his vision, the entire world painted in fire and blood. He gnashes his teeth. His muscles strain as he pulls against the hands holding him down but they can no longer keep him in check as he wrenches out from under one pair of hands and rips another off of him with a sharp jerk and the application of his claws.

“George, answer me,” Dream weeps, “Please, answer me. Sapnap? *Help*, Sapnap, G-George is - I can’t - I need help, S-Sapnap! Why aren’t you answering me!? P-please a-answer me, help, Sap, h-help -” His words are chased away by hiccuping, scared whimpers that quickly grow into hyperventilating sobs, a desperate wheeze as Dream begs for help that won’t come.

Karl’s growling trails off into choking, breathless sobs, ripped open over the coals of his grief, violent in how they pull from him. He can’t think, or breathe, or feel anything beside this shattering pain and that rage, overwhelming and bubbling up his throat as thick as the blood on his hands. His voice catches, cracks, his heart too big for his throat, too small for the grief that comes from it breaking, his words are dying but he isn’t, and he should be, because there isn’t a world he wants to live in if they are not beside him, and all of it, hatred and heartbreak and everything that comes from loving, spills over his blood-speckled lips and Karl *screams*.

There are books where grief is beauty, where breaking apart is a work of art and tragedy is a bestseller.

This is not that kind of story. This is not a scream made to provide catharsis; this is not a mournful lament. This is everything Karl cannot say, can never say, will never say again. It *hurts*. His throat is raw and his heart is breaking and still, he screams and it tears through his throat enough for him to taste copper, lighting up the taste buds on his tongue, making him ache for more of the same. That ache disappears into the overwhelming pain that already fills him. It hurts more than he has ever felt and *still*, still it hurts. It is raw and open, an echo of the wounds marring his family.

This agony is more than he can bear, more than he even thought he was capable of feeling. He’s never felt anything so much.

“You’re grieving for what was lost. It’s understandable.” The Empress says impassively. “But you will both thank me, one day. Love...it does not serve you. Not in this world. Become what you are meant to be. Release yourself from this grief.”

Her voice is grating but it brings Karl's attention to hearing past the rushing blood. He hears Dream's choking cries go silent at her words; his breathing slows to almost non-existence. Karl hears his heartbeat, the way it seems to slow to match, barely there at all. Shock, perhaps. Dream's mind finally realizing what's happened, what's been taken from them. Dream is utterly silent; as silent as the grave. Being overwhelmed by the same loss that is pulling Karl down like an undertow.

The pull in his blood, the magic in his bones, literally dragging at him, it forces him to look up at the Empress that has taken everything from him. Karl has nothing left. Nothing left to lose, and yet, his heart is still breaking. And yet, he loves them still.

The pain that explodes under his skin is nothing compared to that in his heart. He feels the agony of bone, pushing up against the rest of his back, under his nails, in his *mouth*. Every part of him is stretching beyond humanity, but he doesn't really want to be human anymore.

Being human means his heart is broken. Being human means that they are still dead. Karl, for once, is grateful that he is Vex. Grateful for these claws, these fangs, these ruined wings. He can use them to get his vengeance, make this empress and her Court regret ever giving a failing infant a chance at life. It will be their ruin.

The last thing Karl is aware of is turning, jaw extending down to accommodate the fangs, claws embedding themselves into the dry body of a husk and hurling it away from him with the strength of a monster he's slowly been becoming for what feels like lifetimes.

Then everything that is *Karl* is pulled under, drowned beneath crimson waves of grief and hate.

All that remains is the monster.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

HELLO this is my first time posting a chapter for home LOL usually mari does it

we're both pretty busy tomorrow until late so we decided to go ahead and post early since last chapter was a bit of a bummer!! thank u for the kind responses to the last posting tho, it was so fun to read everyone's reaction! I'm a bit nervous about this chapter but I hope u guys enjoy :)

cw: discussions of death and what comes after, brief mentions of past abuse, general content warnings for scarecrow au

Quackity opens his eyes, which is, quite frankly, a surprise.

The last thing he remembers is -

- *pressure around his throat, squeezing and squeezing* -

- gasping, a hand at his throat and he's breathing heavily even though Quackity is ninety-nine percent sure he isn't supposed to be breathing anymore.

He finds himself gripping his chest, and that in itself is a shock. For some reason, he didn't expect to have a body. But he has a chest, and when he blinks, he can see the rest of him; arms, legs, fingers and toes. Whole, intact, unblemished. Almost as if the last thing he remembers wasn't a fight for his life. He feels his wings along the back of his arms. They hang properly, the longest primaries brushing against his elbows. The feeling is unfamiliar after two years without it. He flexes, feels the muscles shift, the feathers fluff up.

"You can sit, if you like." The cool voice makes him jolt, twisting around to find the source of the noise.

The Goddess of Death sits before him in a plush armchair, and the rest of the room melts into coherency around them. From the look of it, it's one of the sitting rooms from her castle, blurred slightly. Inconsistent, solid only as long as he stares at it, and even then, it changes. Subtle changes, like a curtain in a summer breeze, but he notices each one.

When he turns around, he finds a chair nudging at the back of his legs. He's really too stunned to do anything but sit on the edge, giving his wings room.

Kristin smiles and motions a hand between them politely.

"Do you want some tea?"

A tray with a teapot, two mugs, and a plate laid out with cookies materialises between them, atop a table he's not quite certain was there before or not.

"I'm not partial to it myself, but Phil has a taste for it, and I rarely say no to him. I find it helps to ground people after, though."

"Right," Quackity says, "After."

He looks up at her, careful, though all she does is smile back, encouraging. "I'm...I'm dead, aren't I?" He asks, finally able to work his mouth around the question.

"Oh, good, you've figured it out." Kristin says briskly, "It's always difficult when I have to explain what happened. Now we can get down to the interesting part."

"The others...?" Quackity says, already knowing the answer, but hoping to hear anything different.

Kristin's face softens, her smile reassuring. "I am keeping them safe."

"Oh," Quackity says, and then he's crying.

He doesn't know why - well, he does, but he also knows that there is no point to it. He knows he is dead, and he knows that Sapnap is dead and he knows that George and Dream are most likely dead. He knows that Karl is being forced to watch.

He isn't crying for himself, not really. He's crying for the bed left empty back at their home. He's crying for the garden he made, and the carrots that will never be harvested, and the bushes that will never be pruned. He's crying for Patches, delivered safely to Kinoko and with no one to greet her. He's crying for a wedding that will now never happen. He's crying for a ring that isn't on his finger, bare as he is in this afterlife but for the understanding of clothes rather than any that he can truly perceive.

He's crying because Bad and Skeppy won't ever see their son again. Because George won't ever get to properly abdicate, won't get the life he dreamed of. Because there's poetry - fragmented, terrible - in the pages of Quackity's journals that he'll never finish, never improve. Because Karl won't complete his library. Because Dream will have died in the Nether, and they promised him that he wouldn't, and, perhaps worse, *they* died in the Nether when they promised him that wouldn't happen, either.

"Be at peace, Quackity," Kristin says, calmly, "You're rather lucky, I'd say."

"*Lucky?*" Quackity says in a whisper, because otherwise he might start shouting and that would be no way to behave in front of a queen that controls whether he ever sees his friends again or not.

"Tell me, Quackity, do you know what you carry?" Kristin says, quickly enough that it cuts off his anger.

Quackity blinks, taken aback by the sudden change in topic, tears still wet on his cheeks.

"Huh? Carry?"

“Do you *know* what you carry?” Kristin repeats, endlessly patient.

“I - No?”

She sits back in her chair, balancing the mug in her hands, seemingly pausing to collect her thoughts.

“You’d think being alive for so long would leave plenty of regrets. But I don’t have many, honestly. When I look back on the eons I’ve lived, I can count my regrets on just one hand,” She holds up a hand and wiggles her fingers. “That’s how many I have. But,” She folds one finger down, “One of my biggest regrets is what I did to my Guardian when the Empress and I joined forces to take down the Nameless One. At the time, when I was young and selfish, I thought it a pity. With age and wisdom, I now know that it was a heinous tragedy.”

“I’m not Karl,” Quackity says, “I don’t know this story. I don’t know why this matters when I’m *dead*.”

“Give me a moment, and I’ll explain, I promise. You can’t rush these things.” Kristin says, hand turning appeasing, “To put it simply, we needed the power of my Guardian so we killed it, and with that power, we were able to seal away our enemy, protecting all realms in the process and earning our thrones. But the death of the Guardian was more of a loss to my realm than I could have realized. All that remained was a second chance. My final hope.”

Kristin puts down her mug and cups her hands together. Above her palms, the air shimmers and a familiar shape appears. Obsidian, speckled with purple, oval in shape - it’s the rock. Wilbur’s gift.

“The Dragon Egg.” Kristin says.

“The *what*?” Quackity splutters. “Excuse me?”

“I said, the Dragon -”

“Hold the fuck on,” Quackity says, holding up a hand to cut her off, “Wait just a second. What? *What*?”

She raises an eyebrow at him. “Should I actually answer or are you processing?”

“Don’t pretend like that’s a normal statement!” Quackity exclaims, “You’re actually saying to me right now that that fucking rock is an *egg*? I’ve been carrying an *egg* around all this time, and it’s a *dragon egg*? Like, wings, fire-breathing, big lizard, actual fucking dragon!?”

Kristin chuckles, “Yes, Quackity. An actual dragon. A gift bound to the royal family of the End, and the Other Side. To gain power, I once sacrificed my companion to defeat an ancient evil alongside the Empress, and I regret it to this day. I have never been worthy of my throne, but this egg,” she lifts up the image of the egg so Quackity can better see it and, yep, that’s the rock Sapnap had told him to toss out just a handful of hours ago.

“This is a second chance.” Kristin says, voice reverent, “Not for myself, but for my heir.”

Wilbur. Of course.

“Did Wilbur know what it was when he gave it to me?”

Kristin’s lip curls up into a mischievous smile. With a wave of her hand, the image of the egg disappears.

“No, my poor fool son. He doesn’t know the truth of what this egg holds, nor how intrinsically it is tied to him. The two of them are bound to each other, but forcing a connection would only harm them both. It has to come about naturally, through chance, for it to benefit either of them. And by chance, he gave it to you in the hopes that I would have to intervene if something befell you to protect it. And by chance, you and your friends began the process of its hatching and allowed me an entrance I would never normally have had. Take a cookie, Quackity. They’re really very good.”

Quackity takes a cookie. This conversation is getting weirder and weirder. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t often interfere when souls heed the melody of the void. It is only once in a great while that one shines bright enough that it earns my attention, and those are who I offer a place in my Court. The five of you, talented as you may be, would not have caught my eye, but for the special circumstances that bring us here, now. The Egg called to me, and I came to it, and now here I am, speaking to you. So, you’re lucky.”

“Do you want your egg back?”

She laughs. “No. I want to make a deal, Quackity.”

“A deal?” Quackity blinks, mouth dropping in surprise. “*Why?*”

“My son speaks very highly of you. He’s never spoken of anyone in the same way, let alone a mortal. He’s certainly never gifted anyone an heirloom such as this. Even without the Egg, I would have been intrigued.”

“But Wilbur said that...that deals like this mean I would have to join your Court, and it would just be me. Everyone else would still be dead. I’m not a warrior. I’m barely even a politician. And I...without them, I -”

“I understand.” Kristin says, gentle, “I like to think I’ve grown out of my foolish youth. I know better than to offer a deal to you that does not include them. But three lives is a much greater request than to simply waive your own death. A greater price to pay.”

“You’ll...” Quackity swallows, hope beginning to whisper in his heart. “You’ll revive me, and the others, but you won’t...we won’t be forced to be a part of your Court?”

Kristin nods, “You will be returned to your bodies, at the moment of your deaths.”

Quackity isn’t Karl, he doesn’t have a storyteller’s words; he’s a liar by trade, with the occasional dalliance into charmer when necessary. But he doesn’t need a teller’s tongue to be

very aware that nothing in life comes for free. Even if Kristin wanted to, she couldn't let him go without a deal. It wasn't how these Courts worked.

"What do you want?" He asks, firmly catching hold of the hope and attempting to smother it before it causes him problems.

"I have something in mind," Kristin says, "Wilbur has brought you into this mess, so I might as well make use of you."

A sudden fear grips Quackity's heart, reminded of what Wilbur had proposed on the boat. Her words, and that conversation, and the knowledge that he's been carrying around Wilbur's soulmate-pet, and his experience with people in high positions needing to make use of him, all come together to form a chilling image of his future.

"Do you want me to marry Wilbur?" he asks, trying to keep his voice even. Is this going to be it? The moment he gets dressed up pretty and sent to Wilbur's rooms instead of Eret's or Technoblade's, or the ones before them?

Kristin's mouth quirks upwards into a smile. "Do *you* want to marry Wilbur?"

"Will it be enough to bring them back?" He asks instead of answering.

"Quackity," She softens her voice and repeats herself. "Do you *want* to marry Wilbur?"

"No." Quackity admits roughly. "I don't love him."

"If I said you had to, though?" She asks thoughtfully, "If I said that you had to marry my son and make him happy, in exchange for reviving your friends, would you do it?"

Quackity thinks of sharp eyes and even sharper words when those eyes grew angry. He thinks of Wilbur's longing, his ambition, his false promises. Of a love that was hungry, that threatened to devour him at every moment, regardless of Wilbur's intentions.

Quackity is tired of being used by men like Wilbur. He doesn't even know how long Wilbur would live for, once he took his place in the End. When would his suffering end, if he did this?

But he can't imagine a world where he doesn't give up anything and everything for the ones that he *does* love. He can't imagine a world where they wouldn't make it work, somehow. If he had to marry Wilbur and it brought the others back, he's sure that they would come save him.

Even if they didn't, though, he loves them. He would do anything for them. Even this.

"Yes," Quackity swallows. "I would."

"Oh, my dear," Her smile warms, blooms like a flower in spring. "If I tried to force a heart as taken as yours to wed my half-mad son, I'd have to use my other hand to start counting regrets. No, Quackity. You don't have to marry Wilbur. As he is, you can do much better for yourself."

Quackity barks out a relieved, panicked laugh, before slapping a hand over his mouth. “You’d really do him like that, huh?”

“It is a mother’s gift to see how their sons could be, not just as they are, and to love them despite it all. So yes, Quackity, while I love my son, I love him enough to know that what, and *who*, he wants will not make either of you happy. You can do better than him, as he is now.”

“I have.” Quackity says, “Twice over.”

“Besides...I know it’s the mother in me, but I do hope, one day, that he finds what he is looking for. Someone that he loves who can love him back. I’m afraid he missed his chance with your heart, didn’t he?”

“A bit.” Quackity swallows. “A bit a lot, kind of.”

Kristin smiles again, soft, almost nostalgic, “Yes, I can tell how much you love them. And that’s why I think that this deal will work to the benefit of us both.”

She picks up her mug, pouring herself another cup of tea, delicately adding sugar by the spoonful; one, two, three, the spoon clinking against the side of the mug.

“I should have guessed that death itself was the key to awakening the next Guardian. It has been touched by blood, felt a life passing, and it called to me. Where there had been silence for eons, at last, it stirs. And the person to whom it was promised is not yet ready.”

“Wilbur.” Quackity says. It’s not really a question.

“Wilbur.” Kristin sighs, “My son is the best thing in my life, but he is young. Still a babe, in many ways. He will be a good king, in time; he is his father’s son, after all. But he is also mine, and the consequences of divinity weigh on him, as they do on me. He still has a lot to learn. A lot of life left to live. He holds himself to a standard he cannot be expected to meet, and in doing so, falls short of who he *could* be, if only he’d let himself. To this end, he is not worthy of you or your heart, nor the gift that he gave you.”

She sips her tea carefully. “I want to ensure that this precious second chance is protected, that the End and Wilbur will both be proud to call the Guardian their protector. To put it plainly, my deal is this. In exchange for the lives of you and your friends, you three will take this egg and you will guard it as fiercely as my companion once did. You will take the gift I have given you and you will devote it to raising and caring for the hatchling for the rest of your days.”

Quackity stares at her, slack jawed. “You want *me* to raise a *dragon*?”

“And your companions,” Kristin adds, as if this is a completely reasonable request, “I imagine it would be rather difficult for just one person.”

“But...” Quackity struggles to find his words, “*Why*? Why not just...take the Egg to the End and raise it there? That sounds a lot easier for you, and safer for it! What if someone sees the

dragon and thinks it's a threat? What if we die in, like, our forties, and there's no one left to take care of it?"

Kristin hums, "I knew my son liked you for a reason. Tell me, Quackity, why do you think Wilbur lives in the Overworld instead of by my side?"

Quackity doesn't think *he's too annoying to keep around for long* is an appropriate answer, so instead, he says, "Um. Wilbur said he can only visit every seven years, right?"

She chuckles, "Yes and no. Unlike the rest of his family, Wilbur has divine blood. He could stay in the End, with me, as a prince, if he chose to give up his humanity now. Elevated from other beings, removed from the Overworld entirely, focused solely on preparing for the future as King of the End. He could, and I wouldn't have to live alone while my family blossoms away from me." She sighs, wistful. "It would be nice."

"Sure." Quackity says, even though it sounds fucking awful.

Kristin cuts him an amused glance, his white lie not escaping her. She continues, "He remains in the Overworld, and fate willing, he will remain there for a long time because there is so much to learn there. As Allay and Vex, we don't experience love, or hope, or desperation, or even grief in the same way as the rest of the realms do. The Empress and I, we made our mistakes because we thought ourselves so above all of these silly little things. And here I sit, with these regrets, and I'm sure she has her own, as well."

"I wish she'd regret being a bitch," Quackity mutters and Kristin laughs sharply, covering her mouth quickly.

"She's not the worst the worlds have seen." Kristin smiles. "In fact, she's rather merciful, when I haven't gone and pissed her off."

"Say that to my dead body," Quackity crosses his arms, "And all the dead strays in that maze."

"Yes, well." Kristin sobers. "That's why Wilbur is in the Overworld. I gave my son the greatest gift I could think of; the chance to be human. I wanted him to have a life I could never have given him. A *human* life. A life that is precious *because* it ends. I want him to have it, even though I knew it would hurt him, so that he can better appreciate its ending. So that he won't end up with a maze on his hands, one day, for example. And I want that for this guardian, as well."

"It's a dragon."

"When has something ever needed to *look* like a human to be one? To love like one? I seem to recall a certain librarian who looked more Netherkin than anything, last we saw each other, and yet he seemed so very human."

"I...see." Quackity says. It makes sense, in a roundabout kind of way. Even if there is one niggling question in the back of his mind, that might be both too rude to ask and might steal this chance from him before he can take her up on the deal.

“You wonder why Wilbur does not simply take it to the Overworld and raise it there, with his family’s help?” Kristin asks with a knowing smile.

“Yes,” Quackity says, relieved.

“Wilbur believes himself a god.” Kristin says, simply, “And therefore loves as one. The blame rests at the feet of his parents, in that regard, because he *is* and we told him that from a young age. He expects fate to give him his due, and that he should never struggle for it. He *is* getting better, thankfully; he has his brothers, and I see the good they do him. One day, he will love as a human does; knowing it will hurt, knowing it will end, and doing it anyway. On that day, he will be ready. Until then, he isn’t prepared to *raise* anything, let alone the one being that will remain with him throughout the eons, long after the rest of us are gone.”

Kristin leans over, putting down her mug, and resting a hand on Quackity’s knee. It feels real, the only solid thing in the whole room. “You love with the sort of humanity that I wish Wilbur had taken to naturally. Your devotion to your beloveds and to your friends, and the reciprocity that they show you... I was furious, when I found out that he’d given the Egg away. But I’ve seen the lengths that you will go to for each other and that’s how I know that this is the right chance to take. This is how I know that my son’s companion will be in safe hands, if you agree.”

“If?”

Kristin’s tone becomes serious, and she pulls her hand away, sitting back in her chair. “It would be remiss of me to not tell you that taking my deal is a choice. To be human is to choose, after all. There will be consequences that I cannot foresee, and strings attached that you will not enjoy. I control only your death. What happens after I return you to life is up to you. It may be painful. It may hurt. To return would mean pain and suffering, and no guarantee of success. You’ll have to save yourself from the Empress’ grasp.”

“Karl...”

Kristin’s face turns grave. “He hasn’t yet entered my domain. He remains, though how much of *him* is left, I can’t say.”

It’s like a fist grabs his heart and twists it, cracking and creaking in the grasp of a grief so strong he doesn’t know if he can even put a name to it. All of this. All of this, and he might still lose him.

“It can be kinder,” Kristin says, gently, “To stay. You are safe here, in this holding place, if you want to wait for the others to join you. Or, if you want, the way onward is open to you, should you wish it. You will be at peace, I can promise you that.”

Quackity’s throat is as dry as sandpaper, and it takes several attempts before he can speak.

“What happens? If I go...*on*.”

“That’s a question even I can’t answer, Quackity,” Kristin says, “My role is to shepherd souls from the world of the living to the beyond, and I see them off at the door. One day, when Phil

can no longer remain in the End, we will find out together. Until then, I can at least promise that you will be safe and left to dream, as the others do now, until the day your beloveds join you.”

Kristin snaps her fingers and the tea tray disappears. In its place are five books. Three lie on her left; two on her right. He knows, instinctively, that one of them is his. Bound and finished with a gentle hand, stacked between two others.

“Three have been completed. Two will come to their end soon enough, if I know my friend.” Kristin says, “I know what you have lived through. What all of you have been through, for years. The sorrow, the pain, the guilt. There are people waiting for you, in the beyond. They’ve missed you and there will be an end to your suffering, answers to the questions that have plagued you since they left you. I can promise that no more harm will befall you here. I can’t promise the same if you return.”

Quackity sits in silence for a long moment. The books stare up at him; not one is different from the other, each encased in a dark blue leather, the entirety of their lives packed into pages.

Maybe, once, the offer of peace would have enticed him more. To dream, on and on, into eternity, his best friend on one side and one of his beloved’s on the other, until the day all five of them are reunited. Quackity always thought of death as scary, as a swallowing hole of nothingness. He’d grit his teeth through so much to avoid it. The idea of his end being *dreams* is already a positive change.

It doesn’t have to be scary, he realizes. It can be kind. She wants it to be kind, and so it is, for him. If he wants.

And some part of him does. To be in that bliss, an endless dream.

But it would be a dream. It wouldn’t be real. Not in the same way his garden is real, or how Karl kissing him is real. It would just be as faded and indistinct as the room he sits in now. Whatever they would share, in that dream, it wouldn’t be the same. He couldn’t love them as he does now, as much as he can bear and more. A dream is always so indistinct. A quality of unreality to it that he doesn’t want touching the bond that they’ve built together.

He isn’t the same Quackity that met the others on the road, dripping in deceit and shadows. He isn’t even the same Quackity that ran with them, the night they destroyed the throne, terrified that he’d be ripped from them again. He’s grown, because of them and for them and for himself.

In the end, he loves them. He doesn’t know how they’ll make it out of the Court of the Inbetween, but he knows that a second chance is all they need. Just a little bit more time, and they’ll figure it out. He trusts them, and he trusts himself. That’s enough.

“You bring us back,” He says, slowly, “And we’ll raise your egg. Guardian. Dragon.”

“That’s the deal,” Kristin says, and waves her hand once more. The books disappear. “I take it you agree?”

“Yeah,” Quackity says, “Yes. I do. I can’t give up on them now. I promised Karl we’d save him and I promised Dream we’d all get out of the Nether. I can’t break those.”

“Good.” Kristin says, “Teach that same loyalty, that same love, to our hatchling. Keep it safe. That’s all I ask.”

“Right. Keep a dragon safe. How hard can that be?” Quackity laughs, slightly hysterical, “Fuck.”

“Fuck,” Kristin agrees, cheerfully, standing. The room begins to melt back into the nothing it came from, “Oh, and Quackity?”

“Yeah?”

“Name her something nice.”

Quackity opens his mouth to reply, but everything has already gone. Quackity begins to fall.

-

“No, George,” His mother laughs, which is a sound both familiar and not, “No! Stop this instant, that isn’t at all appropriate!”

George, hanging upside down from a branch which sprouts from a thick cherry blossom tree in the garden, continues to swing, letting his arms hang so that his shirt nearly covers his face, exposing his belly to the air.

“Appropriate Shma-ppropriate!” He rolls his eyes, but he’s smiling as he listens to her laugh so freely, “I’m *bored*, mother.”

“You’re acting like a child.” Sapnap rolls his eyes from where he stands next to the Queen. He’s fully armored, though they’re only going for a walk. George’s father is a short distance away, kneeling to smell one of the freshly-bloomed roses.

“Like you can talk,” George puts his hands out, palms flat to the plush grass under him. “I’m *bored*, Sapnap. Entertain me!”

“No! I’m here to do a job, idiot, not be your playmate.”

“Put him in his place, dear,” George’s mother pats Sapnap’s shoulder fondly and Sapnap’s face goes pink, shrinking down from the smug knight to the shy schoolboy in only a blink.

“Ugh,” George wrinkles his nose up. “You’re such a suck-up. Where’s Dream? He’ll play with me.”

George looks around, the world upside down from his vantage point, and doesn’t spot his rather willful knight. Where could he be?

“Actually, yeah,” Sapnap breaks away from his fluster at George’s mother, frowning thoughtfully as he comes over to push George off the branch, “Where is he?”

George falls over with a squawk, landing in a pile of bony limbs but, miraculously, unharmed.

“Hey! Dick!”

“*George.*” His father reprimands, though his voice isn’t truly angry as he joins them, a freshly-picked rose in hand. It’s so red that it looks nearly brown, and he twirls it gently between his fingers as he looks the two of them over as if they’re not but unruly children.

“Sorry,” George says insincerely and then kicks Sapnap’s leg when his father turns to his mother with the rose offered.

She plucks it from his hand with a scoff, but she brings it to her nose to smell and smiles into the petals.

“You’re looking for Dream?” A new voice joins them.

It should have given him a scare, probably, but it’s familiar and welcome and, as Sapnap helps George off the ground, he finds the source of it only a few yards from their tree.

It’s a woman in a dark, ornate dress, an oversized hat with a short, fringed veil, and a warm smile. He doesn’t recognize her, not enough to put a name to a face, but the sight of her puts him at ease regardless. Like an old friend, or a long lost aunt.

“Hello, boys. Your Majesty,” The woman greets them with friendship in her voice, curtsying politely, which George’s mother returns.

“Your Majesty,” His mother clutches her rose in both hands. “What brings you to the garden?”

“I heard that your boys were looking for their third.”

“You know where Dream is?” Sapnap says, sounding suspicious. “Where?”

“Why, he’s just outside of the garden.” The woman motions toward the castle, “I’m afraid he couldn’t join you just yet. Perhaps soon, though, if you’d like to wait.”

“We should go get him,” George frowns, exchanging a worried look with Sapnap.

“That dummy probably got lost.” Sapnap sighs, shaking his head.

“Must you?” George’s mother asks, turning wet, brown eyes to him. George blinks at her, frozen for a moment. His chest hurts under her stare. Has he ever seen her cry? “Wait a while. Play some more, dear. We’ve got so much to catch up on, both of you. Dream can wait, can’t he? You only just got here.”

“Oh, mother, I wish I could.” George grimaces, “He’s waited a lot, actually. I want to stay, but...”

“It’ll only take a minute,” Sapnap chimes in. “We’ll go get him and be right back, ma’am.”

“It may take quite some time to find your way back to this spot,” The woman in black warns. “Reaching this garden is quite the journey. It can last a lifetime, for some.”

“And only moments, for others,” George’s father frowns, taking his wife’s hand. “You’re sure Dream wouldn’t mind waiting? He was always a thoughtful boy.”

“Too thoughtful,” George says ruefully, exchanging another glance with Sapnap. “Sorry, father, but...”

George carefully hovers a hand over his heart. It flutters weakly.

“I don’t want to make him wait for us any longer than he already has.” George admits. “We’ll be right back, okay?”

“Of course, my dear,” His mother allows. “Before you go, come give your parents a hug. Both of you, come along,”

“Ugh, *Mum*,” George mutters, flushing, but he still stomps forward and drags Sapnap right along behind him.

His father hugs him first, squeezing him tight. George can’t remember ever receiving a hug like this from his father. He lets himself enjoy it, wraps his arms tightly around his dad’s sides and carefully inhales the dark cologne spritzed at his father’s neck. George had forgotten, somehow, that he always smells like this.

His dad pulls back, looking him over with wondrous eyes.

“Spitting image of your mother.” His father shakes his head. “Except for my forehead, unfortunately.”

“Hey!”

His father laughs, hugging him tightly again, and then lets him go. George has only a moment to watch before a delicate hand is at his wrist and he’s turning to his mother.

She’s shorter than him, George realizes.

“Were you always shorter than me?” He says without thinking.

“You’ve grown a bit,” She smiles, reaching up to brush his curls out of his face.

“Oh.” He says stupidly. He blinks. His eyes are wet. He wipes the tears away, frowning. “Sorry.”

“No need for apologies, George.” His mother laughs, and wipes her own eyes. “Something’s in the air, no doubt. These damn gardeners. I should exile them.”

“I don’t think that will solve our problem,” George laughs, having to wipe at his eyes again. “Ugh, Prime, the pollen is awful. I’ll have to warn Dream. You know how his allergies get.”

“I do.” She acknowledges, reaching up to hold his face in her chilled hands. He blinks down at her, letting his hands settle over hers. She swipes under his eyes.

“We’ll be right back.” He says, amused. “I promise.”

“Take your time,” She dismisses. “Wander as long as you’d like, George. Your father and I will just wait for you here. It’s a lovely resting spot, isn’t it?”

“It is,” George admits. “I like the tree. You should try climbing it.”

She laughs in shock. “Climb it? Why would I do that?”

“Dunno,” He shrugs. “Because you can?”

She laughs again and nods. “You make an excellent point. Maybe while we wait for you boys to come back, I’ll give it a go.”

“Be careful, if you do. Have dad stand under you, just in case you fall.” He advises, thinking back to all the times he’s let himself fall, knowing that there would be arms waiting to stop him from hitting the ground. It’s a reminder of who isn’t here, a pull at him to head off with Sapnap to retrieve his love. He needs to apologize to Dream about the Bastion, about not trusting him to catch him. When had Dream ever not caught him?

“I’ll be careful.” She nods, and then tugs him into a tight, tight hug. “My little prince. My George.”

“That’s me.” George says lightly. “Though I’m not so little, mum.”

“I suppose not.” She whispers and lets him stand up again. She looks at his face, searching and then assessing, and George lets her for a few seconds before he steps back. She reaches out a hand and Sapnap takes it, leans down to kiss her fingers gently.

“Your Majesty.” Sapnap says, the only time he ever has fucking manners.

“Sir Sapnap,” His mother pulls him to stand straight again. He, too, is taller. She places a hand on his cheek, fond. “What a warm heart you have. Use it well with my fool-headed son, hm?”

“Always.” Sapnap promises.

“I feel I owe you an apology. You and Dream both.” She sighs, “Perhaps...when we meet again.”

“An apology?” Sapnap blinks, “For what, ma’am?”

“We’ll discuss it when you get back.” She nods and releases Sapnap from her grasp, instead reaching out to hold George’s dad’s hand. “Off with you, if you can’t keep Dream waiting. I’m sure he’s lonely.”

“He does get a bit lonely, doesn’t he?” George winces, already turning around to head in the direction the woman in black had mentioned. There’s an urgency building in him. They need to go find Dream.

And now that he thinks about it, they aren’t just missing Dream, are they?

“Hey,” He stops, Sapnap drawing up short right next to him, and turns around to look at the lady in black, “Sorry, but have you seen my other friends? They’re this high, roughly,” he holds both hands up, one shorter than him and one a bit taller, “and one of them is wearing an ugly cloak while the other one kind of looks like he’s sucked on a lemon and isn’t sure if he likes it.”

Sapnap smacks his back.

“They’re both very handsome,” Sapnap corrects grumpily.

“Oh,” The woman smiles. “You’re looking for Karl and Quackity?”

“You know them?” George grins, “Perfect! Yes, them! The idiots have gotten themselves lost in the garden, I think.”

“No, no,” The woman waves her hand, “They’re with Dream, I do believe. Find him and they won’t be far.”

“That sure makes life easier, then.” Sapnap tosses an arm over George’s shoulder and George lets him, content to nod at the woman in thanks and turn back to his parents, who watch them quietly, his mother still holding her rose and slowly spinning it in her fingers.

“We’ll be right back,” He promises, “I’ve got some friends for you to meet!”

“We look forward to it, George.” His father smiles, giving him a wave. George waves back, for some reason feeling the urge to try to cement the picture they make together under the cherry blossom tree. He tries, but it doesn’t seem to stick. Like wisp, it gently floats from his mind every time he stops focusing.

He shrugs. He’ll figure it out later.

“Love you!” He says, and then bolts off into the garden, Sapnap letting out a gleeful shout and following hot on his heels.

“He’s probably lost in the castle!” Sapnap says when they’re out of sight of George’s parents, jogging as they fall into a lighter speed than the full sprint they were in before.

“Probably,” George agrees, looking around until he spots the closest wall of the castle, “Come on, last one there’s got to convince Karl to not flirt with my mom so he doesn’t get executed!”

“No way!” Sapnap laughs, and immediately takes him over on the pathway.

George plays dirty, shoving him as soon as he's within reach, and running past him when he stumbles, laughing the whole while. Their journey is short, full of nearly falling into a lot of thorny bushes, and they find a door to the inner workings of the castle quickly enough.

"Dream?" George calls out, looking around curiously. He sees no sign of their lost third, no matter how hard he peers around or wanders.

"He must be inside." Sarnap shrugs, reaching for the door handle.

"You're sure you'd like to open that door?" The woman says. George looks over his shoulder frowning at her.

"Dream's on the other side, isn't he?" George asks.

"Yes." She nods. "But so are many other things. None quite as pleasant as him, and he's not in the best of shape right now."

"He's hurt!?" Sarnap demands, alarmed, echoing George's own concern.

"Yes," she nods. "But he'll join you here, soon, if you just wait. Quackity and Karl, as well."

"We don't want to wait." George snaps, "Especially not if he's hurt!"

He reaches for the handle, too, and they both tug at the same time, but the door doesn't budge.

"Fuck," Sarnap grunts, "It's locked! Do you have a pick?"

"No," George pats his pockets, "Nothing, damn it."

He turns to the woman to ask if she may have a hat pin they could borrow, but he finds that she's smiling at them, holding a key.

"A gift from Quackity." She says and offers the key.

George reaches out and takes it. It fits into the door perfectly.

"I warn you," She starts to say, "You may not like what you return to. It may be better to wait here. You'll have less trouble that way."

"Don't care, didn't ask," George snorts, and he knows he's being rude, but it was rude of her to not start with handing them the key instead of speaking so cryptically.

"Far be it from me to stand in your way, then." The woman laughs, motioning. "Don't say I didn't warn you, though."

"Thanks for the warning, I guess," Sarnap says dubiously, and then wrenches the door open. Both of them try to run inside at the same time, getting caught in the frame.

"Move!" Sarnap grunts, trying to shove past him.

“No, *you* move!” George scoffs, reaching down to stab at his sides with his fingers. Sapnap scream-yelps, jumping away from the tickling, and it gives George just enough room to get through the door first with a “Ha, idiot! Loser!”

Sapnap follows, not a half-second later, with a huffed out, “*George*, you bitch!” and then George is awake.

-

George opens his eyes and the first thing he sees is Dream and blood.

His head is in a lap, he recognizes almost immediately. He's spent entire days laid in this lap, looking up at Dream from this angle. When they'd been young, it had felt like the most salacious stolen moment, to be so close to him after they'd circled each other for so long. Even after they'd done much more than that, laying in Dream's lap had always been one of his favorite things to do.

There are hands on him, but they're limp, the touch almost burning against the icy chill of his skin. Tears and blood both drip from Dream's face to George's, like a steady rain that blinks him from a deep sleep. His bandages are gone, his face a bloody mess of wounds.

George frowns.

He distinctly remembers dying. He doesn't think it's something that he would misremember.

Was there a cherry blossom tree? And he remembers laughter. Looking for Dream, Sapnap at his side.

Through a fog that feels like cotton in his ears, there is a distant roar that breaks through the ringing silence.

George wants to look, to see what might be making such an awful noise, but he can't stop looking at Dream. There's a relief in his chest, filling him up; a well of fondness and affection, a grief that he was separated from him once again, even if only for a moment.

Dream's face is empty. He'd look like a statue, if not for the blood and tears and the tremors shaking his body. He's barely breathing.

The thought is a reminder that George needs to breathe.

He tries and realizes that his lungs are full.

Sound floods in, his vision clears. He's choking.

George gags and then hacks, rolling off Dream's lap and on his hands and knees as he throws up blood, coughing in full-body spasms as his lungs desperately try to clear out for air.

The roaring has turned into screaming howls, and they're *pissed*, if the tone is anything to go by.

“D-Dream -” He manages to choke out between mouthfuls of copper, “What - what happened?”

He reaches up, touching the wound he remembers, and finds only a hole through his shirt and armor. When he presses his fingers through the torn fabric, he finds skin where there should be an open stab. The flesh is painful to the touch, tender, and his ribs feel fucking broken, but there’s no wound.

Dream doesn’t reply.

“Dream?” George asks again, looking up from what should be a lethal wound.

Dream is still kneeling as if George were still in his lap. His hands open and close in empty air, grasping for something that’s no longer there. The tears and the blood have created a mess of what George is sure is a truly agonizing mixture that travels over his wounds. Dream doesn’t seem to notice it, nor George, or the shouting around them.

George pulls himself up, back onto his knees so he’s level with Dream, and wipes away the blood drying on his mouth, spitting one last time to at least clear his throat.

“Dream? Dream, it’s me.” He reaches out, grasping one of Dream’s hands. A full five seconds pass before Dream seems to startle at the touch.

“Dream,” George says again, lifting a hand to settle along Dream’s neck, his thumb stroking Dream’s jaw, his fingers finding his pulse, horror starting to mount as he finds himself wondering if something had happened while he was - whatever he’d just been, if something had happened to Dream while George hadn’t been there to help him, “Are you hearing me?”

Dream leans into the touch, head heavy. He sways. Under the screams of whatever is happening behind him, George hears a wheezing breath, feels it against his hand.

“Finally.” Dream whispers.

“What?” George blinks in confusion. His brain is still flagging, trying to come back to life - in a very literal sense.

“I was waiting.” Dream slowly lifts his hand to George’s, his palm to the back of George’s. He presses into his touch, turning so his lips touch George’s palm.

“For me?”

“To join you.” Dream snuffles. “George, it was awful.”

“It was awful,” George echoes, “But it’s over now, it’s - we...we fixed it, somehow.”

“It took an eternity.” Dream sobs. “I was waiting and waiting, and nothing happened, I just *existed*.”

“I’m sorry.” George leans forward, gathering Dream up in his arms and holding him tightly. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I didn’t - I didn’t mean to - Dream, I -”

“I thought I’d be there forever,” Dream says, shoulders heaving with his cries as he wraps his arms around George and holds him tight. “I thought I’d be trapped, I thought I’d never see you again!”

George shushes him, leaning down to press his lips to Dream’s hair, kissing him as he squeezes his eyes shut to hold himself together.

“It still hurts.” Dream whispers, rough. “I thought death would be peaceful, but everything still hurts.”

“Death?” George repeats, tongue heavy, “Oh, no, no, we aren’t - neither of us are -”

“Is Sapnap here?” Dream asks, sounding lost, “I couldn’t find him, I couldn’t - is he here? Is he still there, did he survive?”

“We aren’t dead.” George pulls away from Dream’s arms so he can look at his face. The gashes look awful. George feels sick at the sight of them, the terrifying thought that Dream’s vision might be unsalvageable. The regen has definitely worn off by now. Is Dream going to bleed out? Will whatever saved him save Dream, too?

“Dream,” He says, firmer, “Dream, we aren’t dead.”

At least, George doesn’t think he’s dead. He thinks he *was* dead, but he’s - he’s not, now. Somehow.

Dream doesn’t look confused, so much as he looks - addled.

“You were.” He whispers, “I held you and you weren’t breathing. You went cold. George -”

“We aren’t dead.” George says firmly, “Dream, listen to me. We aren’t dead.”

He takes Dream’s hand and pushes it against his chest; right where the wound had been. It stings, but he doesn’t care. It’s near enough to his heart.

“Listen. Feel that?”

Just slightly, Dream nods.

“There. My heart is beating. I’m...I’m alive.” George says, though he doesn’t know *why* or *how*, yet. Not that it matters, in the end. “If I’m not dead, you’re not dead. None of us are dead. Not you, not me, not Sapnap, okay?”

With those words, Dream’s original question finally registers past the shock in George’s system.

“Sapnap.” He repeats, jolted by the name. “*Sapnap!*”

He twists in Dream’s arms, frantic as he looks for his friend and is lucky enough to spot him immediately.

Sapnap and Quackity have dragged themselves to each other and they're wrapped in a tight hug, Sapnap holding his hands across Quackity's neck while Quackity kisses him.

George's voice reaches Sapnap and he twists, too, distressed eyes finding George and Dream immediately.

"Come on, Dream," George struggles to his feet, tugging at Dream, still distraught, pulling him into his arms, "Come on, we have to - Sapnap, Pandas -"

"Guys!" Sapnap stands, too, dragging Quackity with him, who goes along with his pulling like a ragdoll. George barely gets out of the way before Sapnap knocks him over again in his head-first dive for Dream, who he bowls over with a loud cry.

Dream doesn't make a sound in protest, clinging so hard to Sapnap that his hands turn white under all of the crimson.

"Dream!" Sapnap shouts, shoving his forehead to Dream's in a much lighter knock than George has ever noticed him using before, "Dream, are you okay? Are you hurt? Did they hurt you? Are you -"

"You're alive," Dream says, wondrous and ill all at once, "Pandas...You're all...how...?"

"George," Quackity stutters, hands finding George's shoulders, feeling up and down his arms, over his chest, "Y-you're alive. It worked. It worked!"

"*What* worked?" George demands, catching Quackity's wrists, "What did you do? What happened?"

"I -" Quackity sways, looking dizzy with relief, "I made a deal with Kristin, I -"

"You *what*?" George demands. If he had the strength to dread even more than he already does, then he'd feel it. As it stands, his stomach is already in his feet, so he just gasps.

"No, no, it's okay, it's okay, it was just - it was a good deal, I'll explain later! We need to help Karl!"

"Karl?" George looks around, but all he sees is carnage. Bodies of husks, sludgy blood, the Vex watching impassively - the Empress, not even looking at them. Her eyes are, instead, on a crowd of husks. The terrible screaming is coming from the horde. "Is...is *that* Karl?"

"I think so," Sapnap says from where he and Dream have wrapped themselves into a painfully tight ball at their feet. He's holding Dream close, who seems perilously close to retreating into shock. "I think...I think he's finished transforming."

"How do we help?" George says helplessly. "If he's transformed, isn't he just like the monster in the maze?"

"No." Quackity denies immediately. "No, he wouldn't have. He's still himself, I know it. I know it."

“The *Michelle*.” Dream says, wavering as he speaks, still clinging to Sapnap’s hand. “Like on the ship. Call him back. You have to call him back. You get - you get all lost, the magic clouds you, you c-can’t, you can’t think through it, or see through it, or keep hold, you have to have something to follow. Like a prayer.” His hand flexes around Sapnap’s.

“An anchor.” George recalls, remembering that dinner with Puffy and Phil. It feels like that was a lifetime ago. “You have to be his anchor.”

“You think we can talk him down?” Sapnap asks worriedly, exchanging a look with Quackity.

“It’s the only thing we *can* do.” Quackity bites his lip, “It - it’ll work.”

“How are we gonna reach him, though?” George asks as he reaches down to help Sapnap as he stands and pulls Dream up, whose legs shake almost hard enough to bring all four of them back down.

“Leave that to me.” Sapnap looks around quickly and then jogs back to where George had watched him get *stabbed*. Schlong waits in a pool of what George is sure is Sapnap’s blood. Sapnap snags the sword without hesitation, whipping it through the air to fling blood from the blade.

“Shit.” George groans. “For fuck’s sake.”

“What’s happening?” Dream demands, though it sounds more like begging, “Tell me what’s going on, tell me -”

“We’re going to dive into a mob of corpses to rescue our transformed mercenary, that’s what’s going on.” George says, the words sounding even crazier out loud than they had in his head. “I’m borrowing Nightmare, okay? Just -” he grabs Dream’s hand. “Don’t let go. Stay with me.”

“Are you sure we aren’t dead?” Dream asks.

“We’d better not be, for how fucking weird of an interaction I just had.” Quackity kneels and picks Nightmare up, lifting the blade for George to grab.

It heats to near burning in his hand, the usually-sweet melody a dissonance. It tasted Dream’s blood, no doubt, and it’s as pissed off about it as George is.

“We only get one second chance.” Quackity warns as the four of them rally.

“That’s all we need.” Sapnap says grimly and then they set forth for the horde and their lost friend.

-

It is fighting. It doesn’t remember exactly why it is fighting, only *grief, agony, a pain so deep it was more than pain* -

It knows it was *hurt*, and that is enough to flex its claws and bare its teeth and destroy every last thing in front of it, until there is nothing left. Until the world around it is empty, and nothing can *hurt* it anymore, until everything has just disappeared and it can disappear, too, and end the pain -

Blood drips from its claws. It tastes stale copper and swallows the sharp taste with glee. May every drop of blood fuel it further and further on its quest, until there is none left to drink. Another enemy grips at its arm, and then the enemy no longer has a hand. It slices through them with ease, drags its claws down the grey skin until blood pours and the enemy drops, death-still, finally matching the rotting smell that emanates from it.

Then another. And another. *Let them come*, it thinks. *Let me bite and maim and rip, and I will show them how it feels.*

Because it hurts. There are scratches on its body, that's true, but that pain is nothing, a pinprick compared to the *agony* that comes from within. It's something nameless and all consuming, something deep within that fuels each of its blows and is the reason each time it screams. Did it ever stop screaming? No matter.

A choked-off gurgle and an enemy drops as it pins the body down and rips it apart with its fangs. A loosened breath as it rips off a head. A broken snap as the sharpened edges of its bone wings pierce an enemy behind it and hurl the empty body with a great flap.

Someone speaks in a flat tone, saying words that it doesn't care to understand. Oh, but it *hates* that voice. Hates it more than anything, a hatred so strong that its bones burn and its skin trembles with the fervor of it.

That voice belongs to what hurt it. That voice is the reason it is in so much pain. It can rest, after it destroys that voice.

It bellows.

More bodies meet it as it spots it - her. The Empress. Something pulls it toward her, a compulsion. It goes along with it, lets the pull take over its limbs. Enemies step between them but it's nothing at all to rend flesh from bone, limbs from limb.

Maybe it will be overwhelmed, but it doesn't care. All it knows is the battle, and the blood, and the pain below its breastbone, in its core.

Karl!

A meaningless noise. Nothing but another distraction by the Empress. It doesn't know - no, it doesn't *want* to know. If it knows, then it hurts more. It snarls at the noise, at the distraction, a warning not to do it again.

We're alive! Karl!

It will not be fooled by this, by the phantom voices. It will destroy these distractions, the enemies and the voices, and then it will kill the Empress that sits on that wretched throne.

She did this, it is sure of that. Even now, her face has the hint of a smile, something proud.

It will wipe that look off her face. Let her see if she can smile when she lies, choking on her own blood.

It screams, and sprints towards the Empress, determined to *kill* and end this pain.

Karl, it's us! Please!

Lies. They are *lying* to it.

More bodies throw themselves between it and the Empress. It catches one with its claws and hurls it to the side, bringing down its other claw to do the same to the next -

It finds itself pausing, the hint of flushed-alive flesh instead of the death-gray drawing it up short.

These new enemies are half-armed. Two hold swords, and two are empty-handed. It can smell the weakness on the largest one. It makes its mouth water, a desire to sink its teeth into the enemy's throat and yank. An easy kill.

It throws itself forward, attempting to dodge around the swords to reach the weakest first, but one sword is faster. The blade of the sword clashes against its claws, its body colliding against the enemy as they struggle for control of the battle of strength.

This enemy is warm. So warm that it feels the heat seep beneath its skin where they brush against each other.

None of the other enemies were warm.

In the back of its mind, there is a flash of *warm safe a flame cradled in his palm it's love love always love* and it throws itself away from the warmth, screaming again in rage. The flash feels like there is a sword in its chest, though there is no dripping wound.

It *hurts*. This enemy *hurt* it.

It shakes its head, clears away the illusions (memories) and darts forward again, toward the creature with a sword, going low this time in an attempt to disembowel.

The sword blocks its claws again. It looks up in a fury, and notices the tang of salt. This enemy is crying. That's new, too.

It's me, Karl. It's Sapnap. Please. Darlin', please. Come back to us.

It shudders at the words, the pain pulsing. It clamps its claws over its ears and roars, trying to drown out the sounds.

Stop - why can't they stop - can't they see it *hurting* and *stop*, why did any of this have to happen? Why does it have to *hurt* like this?

Karl -

It lashes out with its claws again and the armed one falls back, bowled over by the force and sent sprawling.

Good, it thinks. Something in its heart is screaming.

Other enemies are swarming, and not just on it, anymore. They're attacking these flushed-alive enemies, and the others are distracted. As one sword-enemy falls, the other sword-enemy and the weakest one are surrounded, leaving only the other unarmed one between it and the Empress.

It looks away from this final enemy to her. She watches, standing impassively.

It steps forward, ignoring the unarmed enemy. And then hands *touch* it, cool palms on its burning skin, weak force pushing it back. It falters, more from shock than the strength of this enemy.

It knocks the hands away, shoving forward and sending the unarmed enemy stumbling back.

Small and weak, the enemy catches itself against the ground and stands back up, only to slowly retreat as it prowls forward, locked onto its new prey.

The enemy is crying, just as the sword-enemy was. It babbles, voice high from what it thinks is panic. This voice, too, hurts, though it does not fill it with the same visceral rage as the Empress' does.

Karl, Karl, please, please, please, it's me, it's me, Karl -

The noise stops when it lunges, the enemy pulling back just in time for its claws to catch solely on the leather armour that protects it, ripping all the way through and into the thin material of its shirt.

In the enemy's moment of weakness, it leaps forward, one claw on a weak, fluttering chest, pushing them to the floor with the entirety of its weight. The movement jostles the armour and it slips off and away, leaving the enemy bare and unprotected. Easy prey.

Up close, it looms over its enemy, one claw pinning them to the ground, the other raised and ready to strike.

The enemy looks up at it, fear obvious. It salivates, hearing the frantic fluttering of a heartbeat, *seeing* the blood just under the thin layer of skin so easily pierced by its fangs.

It opens its mouth, baring its teeth. It leans down. The enemy doesn't flinch. It hesitates.

Karl, you promised. You promised that I'd never be scared again. You're scaring me, Karl!

It (he) doesn't know what to do. It (he) knows that voice. Just like it (he) knew the other enemy.

It's (he's) hesitated long enough for the lack of armour to allow for (familiar) feathers to fan out underneath them. They catch it's (his) eye. They look soft, molten browns and yellows.

Another flash, this time of *soft kind gentle feathers under his fingers trust in his hand love love love he loves them* and it hurts, it hurts so much, and he lashes out against the thoughts, he can't -

Something *hot* wraps around him, pinning his arms to his side, pinning his wings splayed out. He howls, but it does nothing as he's pulled back and tilted to the side. He lands on his attacker, who *oophs* into his ear, breath as hot as their body.

He flails, but he's held fast, writhing in the grip holding fast against his rage.

The last time he was pinned, he -

He watched them *die*, he can't, he has to fight, he has to avenge them, *it won't do this again* -

His claws catch against his enemy's legs and dig in, but *something* he can't name stops him from tearing into muscle anymore than a fraction of an inch.

"Ow, ow, ow, fuck, Karl! Karl, you fuck, ouch, stop fucking scratching me, it's *me*, idiot!"

A voice in his ear, hot breath on his cheek. A voice he knows, deep in his bones, deep in his *soul*.

"You fucking promised us, Karl!" The voice continues, "Now come fucking *back*, it's time," the man grits out as he continues to thrash under his hold, "to calm *down*!"

He...promised. It rings true in him. It's a fact, but he doesn't remember where the fact came from, or why.

They keep calling out for Karl. Is he Karl? He feels like a Karl.

"Karl, *please*," The other one, the one he'd pinned just moments earlier, comes back into view, hands hovering in display of harmlessness. His wings are shaking, feathers unkept and stained red. His armour is gone. Karl could end him, and the one that holds him down, in one second.

"We love you," The voice in his ear growls, tremulous and exhausted, "We love you, and you love us, remember? We don't care about the new features, okay, we just need you to recognize us! We can make the fangs work, I swear!"

"We came back for you. Please come back for us." The winged one begs, dual-colored eyes focused on Karl's face. "You belong with *us*, not with her."

It feels, just a bit, like falling into lava and water at the same time. The sort of immediate shift from two liquids into an inhumanly strong solid. The names slide into place like they had never left him in the first place, the tide of crimson anger and grief retreating in gentle waves, fading until his view is clear.

It still laps at his mind, saltwater against an open wound, but his wonder is too much to allow that to drown him again.

He knows them. He *knows* them, and he knows himself.

“Sap,” Karl says, voice cracking, “*Q*.”

“Karl?” Sapnap asks, voice hopeful. “Is that you? Like you-you?”

Karl carefully pulls his claws from Sapnap’s thighs.

“I think I ate part of a husk.” he says in response, smacking his lips.

“Oh, thank fuck,” Quackity says, his face crumpling. “Karl, you fucking *asshole*, I thought you’d lost your damn mind!”

“Only a little.” Karl says and then Quackity throws his entire body into Karl’s chest with a hysterical laugh. Sapnap’s arms release Karl from the grapple, holding him instead in a hug that Karl is sure is cracking his bones and Karl clings to them both, his mind trying to come to terms with the sudden shift in thinking. In *awareness*.

“Don’t you dare do that again,” Sapnap says, into the back of Karl’s neck, tears steaming away against Karl’s skin, “Don’t you fucking *dare*.”

“I’m sorry,” Karl bawls, the weight of all that happened without them practically freezing him in place, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, ‘m sorry, sorry -”

“You’re here,” Quackity says, sniffing into Karl’s chest and then lifting up to kiss him, speaking between each rough peck to Karl’s face, “Shut up - you’re here - we’re here - that’s all that matters -”

“You were dead,” Karl weeps as he’s kissed, “You were *dead*, I saw you die, I saw all of you *die* -”

“We’re okay,” Sapnap promises, “I don’t really know how, but we’re here, we’re alive, alright? We’re all here, it’s okay,”

The words are jarring, sending alarms blaring in Karl’s head, “*George* -”

“- is fine,” Quackity says, cupping Karl’s cheeks and wiping away his tears, even as he continues to snifle. “We’re all okay. I - Well, I’ll explain it later, okay? All you need to know right now is that we’re all okay.”

Karl looks around, trying to spot his friends, to confirm their words. He sees them, surrounded by husks who have gone still. George is wielding Nightmare, the both of them covered in the sludge-blood of their opponents, and so much red of their own. But they’re *alive*. Karl knows they shouldn’t be, anymore than Quackity and Sapnap should be. Anymore than *he* should be.

“You’re okay...” Karl breathes out, eyes burning with relief all over again, “You’re both okay?”

“Karl?” Dream’s voice is wavering, small as he turns in their direction, nearly bumping into a frozen husk if not for George’s quick tug. Karl has never heard him sound like this, and he never wants to hear him like this again. He sounds afraid, like the world will disappear around him at any moment, and weak and hazy. He’s not well. Karl remembers the way the monster had thought of him. The weakest link.

“Yeah,” Karl lifts his head higher, watches George and Dream limp to them and collapse onto their knees next to them. As soon as they’re both close enough, he reaches out and pulls them into the embrace, “Yeah, I’m here, Dream, I’m - I’m good, and George -”

“I’m okay,” George says, breathlessly, “I promise, I’m okay. We’re okay. Fuck. ”

Sapnap reaches across the tangle of limbs, and grips Dream’s hand and Dream exhales shakily, leaning forward to rest his forehead on the back of Sapnap’s hand.

For a moment, Karl can’t see where any of them begin or where each of them ends. He doesn’t need to. Against all odds, they’re alive. They’re alive. He repeats it over and over and over. No matter what happens next, they’re alive.

They just have to stay that way.

-

George is the first one to look at the Empress.

She watches them from the dias, a faint frown on her lips.

“You made a deal.” She says, sounding less than thrilled. “How unlike the Queen to insert herself into my affairs.”

“You think you know a person,” Karl says, voice pained.

“No matter.” The Empress continues. “Make all the deals you’d like. Her power extends only to its limits, and this Court, as she well knows, is far beyond those.”

She snaps her fingers.

The husks begin to move again. Those that still stand take a step forward; the ones that Karl did a number on begin to drag their bodies toward them, if they have limbs left with which to crawl.

Dream jolts up from where he’d woozily begun resting against Sapnap’s hand, head turning wildly.

“There’s got to be something.” He says, “George, there’s got to be something.”

“There’s got to be.” George agrees, his head spinning, his brain still foggy from fucking death.

“Isn’t there a rule about murder?” Karl complains, shifting under all of them as if preparing to fight again, “There’s got to be a rule about fucking murder, the fucking service here *sucks*.”

Something *pings*.

“Stop!” George shouts, struggling to stand. Dream grabs at him but George regretfully brushes his weak grip off, needing to be on his feet.

Surprisingly, the husks stop moving.

“Are you reconsidering my offer?” The Empress asks, “I’m afraid it’s no longer available.”

“No, I’m not.” George snaps, his mind whirring as it tries grasping for something, anything. Something is there. Something is there, in what Karl said. He *knows* there's something he could do, he just has to figure it out. He just has to fight through the fog. He needs to remember what his mother spent so many years trying to drill into him about the politics of court.

He runs through their conversation with the Empress, shuffling through the different components like playing cards. The offer to Karl, the accusations of their treachery, the deals she offered. Again and again, trying, like Karl, to find a loophole, a mistake, *something* to get them out of this situation.

“Your rudeness, Your Majesty, is unappreciated. You have offended this Court *enough*, I should think. Have the decency to die.”

Hospitality. The deals. Sapnap’s voice, echoing in George’s mind; *I only ever swore an oath to one king*. His signature on a royal decree. Sapnap and Dream, kneeling before him, a ceremony his mother insisted on. *I’m George’s knight before I’m anything else*, Dream had said during the storm.

It falls into place easier than it should, and yet far too fucking late. Better a delayed realization than one that never happens, he supposes.

“We didn’t offend the rules of this Court,” George says, voice shaking with exertion, but clear and strong nonetheless, “*You* did.”

The whispering of the court hits them like a wave, the silent faces of these masked Vex broken as they lean in and murmur amongst one another. The Empress’ face turns thunderous.

George refuses to be cowed by her gaze.

“There was *no* collaboration between your Court and Karl. He won your trial fair and square.”

“More lies.” The Empress snaps. “At least be original, if you’re going to spit yet more rot, little king.”

“Not a word of that was a lie!” George thunders right back. “You prove it in your address!”

She pauses, his words obviously catching her attention.

“You have my attention.” She allows. “Proceed.”

“You know who I am.” George squares his shoulders. “I am King George the First. I was born the prince of Kinoko Kingdom. By blood and title, I inherited the throne to my kingdom. He,” he points at Dream, “is *my* knight. He was intended to be *my* knight since he was barely able to hold a sword. He’s *been* my knight since he reached the age of majority.”

The Empress’ lips tighten. She understands where George is going with this. George continues, anyway.

“Sir Dream has been a member of my Court since the moment he was recognized as an adult in the eyes of my kingdom’s law,” he says, and the words ring out into the Court, to all of the Vex listening as the Empress glares at him with seething, cherry-coal eyes. “He swore his fealty to *me*, Your Majesty, long before the Nether stole him or the Warden lost to his sword. My apologies for the loss of your courtier, but Dream has not been and never will be released from his oath to me. He is mine. Unless your Court does not recognize the authority of a monarchy that *your magic* installed in the Overworld, he has never been and will never be a part of this Court. Not without my permission.”

He takes a long eternity to breathe, and then adds, “You broke your own rules of hospitality, Your Majesty. Karl completed your trial, when no one else did, and he did it without breaking your rule, and you had his retinue slaughtered in your halls when we were welcomed as guests.”

He lets the words sink in, watches her eyes narrow.

“All due to a misunderstanding,” he finishes.

“A misunderstanding.” The Empress repeats, chin tilted upwards in a way only royalty can achieve. George can do it, too, so he does.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” George smiles. The victory is sweet. “A misunderstanding.”

She watches him for a long, long moment. And then, much to George’s relief, she nods.

“How fortunate, then, that no harm was done.” The Empress says. “Here you all stand, breathing once again.”

“And we’re thankful.” George continues. “Unfortunately, allegations were made. You know, more than anyone, how important reputation is amongst the Courts. I’m afraid that ours may have been besmirched. It’s a slight, Your Majesty, that stings.”

He folds his hands behind his back, and then snaps his fingers rapidly at the others as he speaks. He's done it, he's won them the fucking argument but he's also just fucking died and it's someone else's turn to do the smooth talking because George didn't stay king for a fucking reason.

"A slight." The Empress narrows her eyes, lips turning down into a deeper frown.

"A slight easily rectified," Karl speaks up hastily, voice wrecked. Possibly from all the screaming.

"Your claim is recognized." The Empress stares at them as Karl joins George, the both of them worse for wear but standing strong at each other's sides. "Recompense may be in order. Ask it, then, Karl Jacobs."

"I was accused of breaking the rules at the trial," Karl raises a finger, "And of lying in your Court," he raises a second finger. "And, lastly, Dream, my retainer, was accused of breaking his oath to his king." He raises a third finger. "By my count, Your Majesty, that is three counts of very serious accusations."

"A misunderstanding." The Empress says stiffly.

"Of course, ma'am," Karl bows his head. "But one that, regardless, led to three counts. And, so there are three requests that I make. The first is that you reverse my transformation. I want to be human again. The second is that I be released from my place in your Court, despite having earned it without trick or falsehoods. The third is that you allow us safe passage back to the Overworld, so that we may live out our lives peacefully, away from your Court."

"You truly will deny your birthright?" The Empress asks, sounding genuinely curious. "The life of a god, so that you may see only a sliver of time and die as a homely human?"

"Well, Your Majesty," Karl sighs. "My reputation has been stained. Though this is only a misunderstanding, and one I easily can forgive with the granting of my three requests, I'm afraid that those in your Court who witnessed today may not be as understanding as you to my plight."

"Be true to me, Karl Jacobs." The Empress intones.

"I just want to be human." Karl says, after a pause, his voice tired. George reaches out and tugs at his cloak where the Empress can't see, hoping it brings some comfort. It must, for Karl continues. "I just want to go home, Your Majesty."

The whispers pick up again. The Empress continues to stare, unblinking, as she takes time to make a decision.

When she holds up a hand, the Court goes utterly silent once more.

"You are impertinent, Karl Jacobs," She says, "You ask much, for a simple misunderstanding."

George holds his breath.

“But I will allow this. By my will, your requests are granted.”

The tension drops from Karl’s shoulders, and he sags against George’s side. Relief floods through George like a river.

“Karl Jacobs.” Her voice rings out again, and George’s entire body goes tense again. “The Court recognizes your rejection of your Empress and your Court. I will grant your requests. You will leave the Nether, and you will never be welcome in this realm again. You, nor those you call kin. You are banished from my realm, and never, Karl Jacobs, will you find a home in my presence again.”

“That’s...okay.” Karl looks up at the Empress and nods, “I accept this.”

The Empress is not done. To the letter, George realizes, will she grant Karl’s request.

“My dominion is life. As you have requested, I will remove my gift. No progeny will bloom from you, nor your retinue.” Her eyes fall on George, who shivers under the stare. “The bloodline which has ruled Kinoko Kingdom for generations ends with you, King George. Do you understand?”

It takes a second for the words to compute in George’s brain, but they do. No kids. He can do no kids. He’s great with no kids, actually. His eyes slant to Sapnap. He looks stricken, but he soldiers his expression quickly when he notices that George is looking.

“We do,” George says, “We understand, Your Majesty.” And then, despite everything she’s put them through, and all that they’ve done, he was still trained by his mother, so he bows. “That is...very generous of you. Thank you.”

“Leave my Court, little king crowned by my own hand.” The Empress says, “And do not return, not one of you. You will find none who speak ‘friend’ to you in this place.”

“Bummer.” George hears Sapnap say behind them, and he turns to glare sharply enough that Sapnap snaps his jaws shut.

It takes a moment for them to struggle to their feet. An even longer moment to manage, between each of their injuries, putting one foot in front of the other long enough to make it towards the doors. Maybe it would be easier if they let go of each other, reorganized themselves so that they could support each other properly.

They don’t let go. Not for a single second. Not until the Inbetween is behind them, and the portal to the Nether is in front of them. And even then, George still holds them all tightly as they step through, one last time.

-

Quackity would like to be able to say that their escape was easy, but it surely fucking was not.

They end up back in the Bastion. The Nether is hellishly hot and he wilts under the heat almost immediately, unwilling to ask Dream for his cloak when Quackity is pretty sure the

enchancements are the only things keeping Dream alive right now.

Unlike their journey *to* the Basion, though, Karl feels the effects of the heat, too.

“Holy shit,” he says, legs buckling. “Holy *shit*, how did any of you breathe like this?”

“Badly.” Quackity whines.

“Come on,” Sarnap says, but he isn’t talking to them. He’s kneeling in front of Dream, face determined. “Hop on.”

“What?” Dream asks, swaying with his eyes almost entirely closed.

“I’m going to carry you.” Sarnap wriggles his fingers, though Dream can’t see.

“No.” George says immediately. “We’re going to go down into the Bastion, and we’re going to make camp. I’m going to clean Dream’s face and rewrap it so he doesn’t get an infection while we walk, and we’re going to eat, and sleep, and then we’re leaving when we wake up and we aren’t stopping until we get back to the portal.”

“I love that plan.” Quackity says quickly, before anyone can argue, and Dream is, honestly, too out of it to cast a vote so George claims that he gets *two* votes since Dream is incapacitated, and that is the plan they follow.

Quackity and Sarnap head down first, check to make sure that the building is still empty and the Empress isn’t playing one last dirty trick on them. Just as before, the place rings with the silence.

Getting Dream down is an exercise in testing out exactly how much terror Quackity has left in him to feel, but they all manage to make it. They make camp and Karl, exhausted but determined, enchants one of their pots to refill with water. Where George gets the energy to carefully clean Dream’s wounds and re-wrap them, Quackity has no idea. The moment he lays down, he’s unconscious before they can even decide watch rotation.

Whatever the rotation ended up being, Quackity isn’t part of it. He wakes the next...morning, he supposes, to all five of them passed out. Dangerous, but not nearly the most dangerous thing they’ve done in the past however long they’ve been in the Nether.

He pulls out rations and uses the luke-warm water still enchanted in the pot to clean himself. Then, while Karl sleeps, Quackity uses it to scrub him down as best he can, as well.

As he looks at Karl’s sleeping form, he’s relieved to see that, already, Karl seems to be returning to his human appearance. The fangs have shrunk, and the bone-whiteness of his skin has begun to warm into the pinkness of life.

When Quackity turns him over, there are pools of fresh blood soaked through the back of his shirt, but the boney appendages which had ripped through his skin so recently lay in a dismal pile on the ground, now disconnected from his back.

If Quackity weeps over it, he does so quietly, so as to not wake any of them up.

Within the hour, regardless of Quackity's noise level, they all return to consciousness. They eat, keeping their consumption light, re-fill their water skins, and bully Dream onto Sapnap's back before they make their way, slowly but steadily, out of the Bastion and back into the Nether proper.

Their journey back is, as George ordered the day before, direct. There is no careful navigating as Karl pauses to listen to his inner instincts. Dream and Sapnap had, thankfully, memorized their route and Dream, even concussed, seems to have held steadfast to the knowledge of how to safely remove themselves from the Nether; between him and Sapnap, who leads them, they have a general direction to go.

Sapnap rarely allows Dream to walk on his own. The only breaks they take are when he needs to rest his arms. Quackity would be sick from the lack of rest stops, if they were going anywhere their normal speed, but carrying someone as heavy as Dream slows Sapnap down, and with their two hardest marchers slowed, George sets the pace for something steady but reasonable.

Still, they have to make camp, eventually, and they do so in a grove of the blue tree-like vegetation that they'd discovered on their first journey through.

"Something on your mind?" Sapnap asks George as they eat around a small fire, flagging from his heavy walk. Dream is already asleep, perhaps more exhausted than all of them despite his lack of movement, having refused food and taken only a few sips of water. It worries Quackity. He tries not to think about it and just trusts that Karl's enchantments will hold out until they can reach Kinoko, and medical attention for his head.

Quackity knows better than to pray to whatever might hear him in the hell that is the Nether, but he pleads to the universe that the enchantments will hold out. He wonders if the egg can understand his whispered pleas from where he's still got it safe and warm against his hip, where it hides in his blood-stiff pocket. He can feel something moving inside, but there hasn't been any cracking, and he prays that this holds out until they get home. He hasn't yet told any of them about the deal, but he knows he'll have to tell them soon. Once they're out of the Nether.

"Thinking about Kinoko." George says, turning one of the blue mushroom-like saplings he'd unearthed over in his hands.

"What about it?"

"The hermits." George continues thoughtfully. "They said something about blue wood, didn't they?"

"Did they?" Sapnap blinks. "I dunno. I wasn't at the meeting. Ask Dream."

"Dream's brains are scrambled eggs right now, I'm not going to bother him about some bullshit the council talked about." George scoffs. His eyes continue to drift to the blue tree-things around them.

"What's the harm in taking some back?" Karl asks, eventually.

“None.” George admits. “I think we should take a few back.”

“A few what? Saplings?”

“Yeah.” George nods. “I’ll bet we could set up a nursery for them in Kinoko.”

“Well...” Sarnap says dubiously. “If you say so, dude.”

“Just open the enderchest,” George rolls his eyes, standing up, “It’s just some dirt and saplings. If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work. But I’ll bet it does, because I’m a fucking genius.”

“You’re somethin’, alright,” Quackity snorts, joining him as he starts to carefully dig up some of the mushroom-saplings around them. Karl takes all of their cooking pots and fills them with the oddly red top soil while Quackity and George spend the next while carefully pulling saplings. When George has a happy handful, he rolls them up in one of their camping blankets and stores everything in the enderchest with a smug smile.

“Look at you,” Quackity teases, when they’re all done and gathered back around the fire. “Thinking like a king.”

“For the first and last time,” George says with a huff, fingers absently stroking Dream’s hair. “Bad had better thank me if this pays off.”

They sleep again, though Quackity can’t be sure for how long. He does keep watch this time, and he spends almost all of it watching Karl instead of their surroundings.

This time, as he sleeps, Quackity can easily spot the difference from even when they first set up camp. His hair looks a warmer shade of brown. His skin is almost completely back to the peach-pink it was before. His fangs have disappeared. His nails are still abnormally sharp, but Quackity wouldn’t call them *claws* anymore.

However long they camp, it’s not much time. Quackity feels as if he barely shut his eyes before he’s being woken up and they’re setting off again.

He’d like to say that he’s relieved when they finally spot the portal, but, honestly, Quackity is numb from exhaustion and shock. He barely feels anything but the faintest hint of ‘finally’.

“Fuck this place,” Sarnap says as soon as he sees the portal, and then he turns it into a little tune that they all join in on as they walk the final moments.

Dream is unconscious on Sarnap’s back, limp over his shoulders. Quackity doesn’t think about it. He doesn’t worry about it. Dream is just very tired.

“Fuck this place,” Sarnap sings loud enough that his voice strains as they reach the purple glow, “Fuck this place, *fuck* this place, *fuck* -”

Sarnap doesn’t stop walking. He simply goes straight through the portal, no hesitation in his step. Quackity follows just as soon, holding tight to Karl’s hand.

The shift in temperature is apparent enough that Quackity almost faints from it, going from such a hot, painfully dry world to a cool, properly oxygenated forest. It's night. Quackity had almost forgotten that night existed. Against his hip, the egg shifts.

"Give me Nightmare." George says, the moment that they're all out.

Quackity, who's been holding both Nightmare and Schlong, hands Nightmare over. He watches as George unsheathes the blade, looks at it for a moment, and then hefts the handle up, blade pointed parallel to his body, and brings it straight down into the obsidian.

With a shrieking sort of shatter, the purple of the portal disappears. Nightmare hisses as enchantments burn away, fighting against the magical backlash.

"Karl, I'm going to need your help to fix that before Dream finds out." George says and Quackity laughs. It's full of hysteria.

"We have to keep going." Sapnap says, "Dream needs a doctor now."

Quackity's feet ache. His eyes are heavy. His head pounds. His bones protest the sudden shift in temperature.

"Let's go," he agrees, and starts walking.

Someone catches his hand and he laces their fingers together on instinct. When he glances over, he sees Karl glancing back at him.

He looks human; as human as he's ever looked. Tired, and in pain, and dirty, and so very, very human.

Color has returned to his pupils and irises. Moonlight peeks through the trees, casting pale beams across his face as they walk. Every time the light hits his eyes, Quackity gets a peek at a colour that is distinctly not blue.

They break from the birch forest, the canopy thinning out, allowing for Quackity to look more closely.

Karl blinks at him, eyes pulled low by exhaustion.

"Huh." Quackity says. "I wonder if that's permanent."

"What?" Karl asks curiously, blinking more rapidly.

"Your eyes." Quackity shrugs. "They're golden."

"Oh." Karl says. He, too, must be too tired to feel more than faint echoes of emotion. "I guess we'll find out."

Quackity nods, and holds his hand, and follows George and Sapnap close, and reaches out to touch Dream's back, feeling his shallow breathing, proof that he's still alive, still holding out until they reach a doctor.

“Almost there.” He says, and three voices grunt back affirmatives. The ringing silence of the remaining voice echoes around them all.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

We're coming to the end now... I can't believe it! only two more chapters!!

Also, between now and last week, I (Bramble) got to see MCR live and they played S/C/A/R/E/C/R/O/W, aka, the song this au is named after and where we got the title "When The Sunlight Dies" from. Seeing as MCR is how we met, it's only fitting that Gerard Way and the rest of the band blessed this chapter :D

Also, we want to make sure that we've seen everyone's amazing art before we finish this so make sure to tag us in any fanart of scarecrow au by @'ing us on twitter or tagging it #scarecrowau! There's a couple (Nats i'm looking at you) that i'm saving for a big hurruh next chapter so everyone can see how incredible the fanart is for our fic!!! (that's still wild, thank you thank you thank you all so much :D)

And as we come to the end, then, a big thank you to the scarecrow server, which as always is so much fun to chat in and full of the loveliest of people. We do weekly readings, have a minecraft server, and we're hoping to do a big Q&A/writers commentary after this fic is done!

As always, the largest thank you to you, the readers, the kudos'ers, the commentors. You've kept us going. We love you.

They reach the outskirts of the Kinoko capital by sunrise.

George sits in the back of the wagon, Dream's still form leaning against his chest, and watches the world go by as he strokes through Dream's hair. He hopes it's a soothing touch, that Dream picks up only that he is being held and not that he is being held by someone who feels like he's about to die of stress and exhaustion.

George has died before, more recently than he wants to acknowledge, so he's officially allowed to make the comparison.

Karl has been surrounded by his guild since the moment they'd shown up, a small herd of horses and a modest wagon coming to their aid only a handful of hours after they'd left the birch forest. Apparently, Jimmy had set up a watch to alert the guild upon their return.

George hadn't been thinking about their return journey, when he'd led their wild escape from Kinoko. He'd just been focused on *leaving*, not on getting back. He'd firmly believed that he wouldn't need to return, that he was finally going to wash his hands of this place once and for all.

Now, Dream is breathing shallowly against his collarbone, and his skin is hot, and he hasn't woken up for hours and hours. It's so eerily similar to their last forced return to this city that he can't help but look around for Schlatt at times.

"How is he?" Sapnap asks, pulling up alongside the wagon. His horse is almost too big for him, because the Beast guild are all uncomfortably massive. This horse's eyes are nearly a head above George and Dream, and Sapnap is too far up to touch them without bending in an uncomfortable way. George doesn't let himself think that it was nicer the first time they were carted back to Kinoko, when he at least had them both next to him. He doesn't need Sapnap's warmth next to him, but he wants it right now.

"Sleeping." George says, because 'sleeping' sounds better than 'still unconscious.'

"Fuck." Sapnap curses, nervous and mad about it. "I'm going to ride ahead. Get a doctor ready."

"Send for Bad." George requests, and then watches Sapnap put on a burst of speed to reach Karl and Jimmy.

Quackity, who's driving the wagon, looks over his shoulder but doesn't say anything. George is grateful. His throat feels too tight to say much more than he's already said.

He watches Sapnap ride off ahead, his horse quickly disappearing into the horizon.

George leans down, rests his cheek on Dream's head. He feels the fever even like this. He listens to Dream's breathing, feels the slight rise and fall of Dream's chest under his arms, and lets the sunlight slowly warm him.

It's a little less than an hour later that the first farm houses show up. The capital is surrounded by flower farms and, while the fields are empty as the tail-end of the summer harvest time draws to a close, the farms are still in peak operations. There are farm hands and gardeners out and about before their little convoy comes through and they all stop to watch, much to George's discomfort. *Figures* that, yet again, his supposed subjects are seeing him in some of his worst moments.

He more firmly hides Dream, pulling the hood of his cloak up to obscure his face, though he doubts anyone would be able to place him with most of his features covered by bandages. He'd used the last of their stock on re-dressing his wounds at their last camp-stop in the Nether.

These are tinged pink. George isn't sure if the bleeding has fully stopped yet. He still isn't sure if Dream's eyes are safe, despite what he'd told Dream when it had first happened. He isn't sure of anything except that he's very tired.

"Sapnap's brought a doctor." Quackity says, not long after. The farms have been left behind and the city-proper has come into view. In the far distance, George can see the castle.

George would prefer if he could get the royal doctors, or whatever they want to call themselves now, but the idea of waiting even a moment longer than he needs to in order to

get Dream medical attention outweighs his desire for familiarity. He'll settle for the man who stands beside Sapnap's horse, while Sapnap raises himself on the stirrups and waves his arms wildly to catch their attention despite being only down the cobblestone street.

The rough stone rattles the wagon as the ground shifts from packed dirt to cobble. George holds Dream tighter, somehow, and lets a hand rest at the base of his skull to secure his head.

"This the doc?" Chris is the one to speak up when they draw to a stop in front of Sapnap and the man.

"Yep," The doctor nods. He's an older man, and completely unfamiliar to George. That shouldn't surprise him, Kinoko isn't small and it's impossible that George would have a running list of practicing doctors in his mind at all times, and yet he still narrows his eyes and looks the man over.

If Sapnap has vetted him, then George will go along with it, but he doesn't have to like it.

"Is this the patient?" The doctor peers into the wagon, "Can you pull the hood back?"

"Not in the street." George says coldly.

"Fair," The doctor steps back, not phased by his tone, "My partner is preparing a room. This way."

He motions and begins walking. Their group follows.

George wonders if they paint as odd a picture as he's imagining; an old man still in robes walking down a thin street with five horses and a wagon ambling behind him, the king of the country and his knight laid out in the back and a guild of mercenaries surrounding him.

George is hesitant to let Dream go, but he knows he isn't strong enough to help move him, when they reach the practice. Jimmy and Sapnap get him off the wagon with George's help, and then they carry him in through the front door.

George watches him disappear. He can't see his face as he's taken in, the hood doing perhaps too good a job at hiding him.

Quackity pauses at his side, frowning.

"Are you not going with him?"

"No." George says, slowly curling his hands into fists. "I'll just get in the way. Bad will be here soon. He's going to want answers. I'll talk with him."

"We can wait inside, at least." Quackity tries, but George shakes his head.

"It's nice out." He lies. The morning is too cold after so long in the heat. The chill hurts. But he knows that if he goes inside, he won't be able to stop himself from continuing on until he's at Dream's side again, and then he won't be able to tear himself away. He won't be strong

enough to do that, selfless enough to do that. He doesn't want the shitstorm that is about to descend upon them to reach Dream's sickbed. He's going to need rest.

"I'll stay with him, Q." Karl joins them, Chandler a still-glaring shadow over his shoulder. He's obviously still giving Karl the silent treatment, which has been an on-going punishment since he finished yelling upon finding them, but he's also been unwilling to leave Karl's side just yet, too.

"You should all probably go get checked out," Chris scoffs, "You look like shit."

"Thanks." Karl says blandly. In the morning sun, his eyes are much more jarring to look at. George isn't sure if it's his own sight that makes the gold so blinding, or if that's just really how they look, now. Either way, it's better than when he'd just had white orbs and nothing else. George is happy to take the piss eyes over those.

"We're okay." Quackity motions between himself and George. "We had...help. Karl, though, should absolutely go get checked out."

"I'm hoping that if Bad sees how fucked up we look, he won't yell at us." George says, only half-joking.

"If we look like this when Skeppy sees us, he's going to yell even louder than Bad would have." Quackity points out, and George winces.

"There really is no winning in this place." he sighs, gaze drifting to the open door of the office again. Have the doctors removed Dream's bandages? Do they know if they can save his eyes, yet?

A bird swoops low from out of nowhere, landing with a plop on Chandler's shoulder. It's a giant fucking pigeon, plump and speckled. Chandler reaches up, grabs the pigeon off his shoulder and turns it upside with, much to its mild annoyance. It coos aggressively, but Chandler just unties the note from its leg and plops it right back down on his shoulder.

"A royal procession is coming." He reports, "And I'm saying that to everyone but Karl."

Karl sighs. "I said I was sorry, dude, come on."

"Talk to the bird." Chandler glowers, pointing at the pigeon. Karl subsides with a shake of his head.

"Go hide inside," George shakes the stiffness from his shoulders. "This is going to be a long conversation. I'm probably going to have to go to the castle. Can you stay and keep an eye on my idiots for me?"

He glances at Quackity for an answer, who looks reluctant but nods, just as the faint sounds of hooves on cobble reaches George's ear.

"You're sure?" Quackity checks. "We can make them wait. We just got back."

“Let’s get this over with.” George sighs. “While Dream is still out of it and Sappnap is distracted. Maybe I’ll be able to get something done without those two hot heads around to cause trouble.”

Karl snorts, crossing his arms.

“I’ll be with George.” he assures Quackity. “Try to keep Sappnap out of their way, if you can. I have a feeling he’s going to try to read a few books and take up a career in medicines any second now, if we aren’t careful.”

Quackity smiles lightly and knocks them both on the shoulders before he goes inside, shutting the door behind him.

George drops his smile.

“This is going to suck.” he says.

“Oh, for sure.” Karl agrees, and then lifts a hand and waves rapidly. “Bad! Long time no see!”

George, dread heavy in his chest, turns to face the music.

The Hermits are pissed, George comes to discover. His disappearance was a slight and an annoyance, and resulted in a near-bloody argument between the envoy and the council. The council, itself, is evenly split on what to do; announce that George has deserted his post or continue on with the charade of a Mourning Retreat. Everyone is annoyed about his disappearing act.

George keeps the knowledge of the blue wood to himself, for now. He’s still not sure if he wants to give it up, if he even wants to get involved at all. Kinoko has lasted this long without him; it may be rough, but he has no doubt that they can work something out with the Hermit cities without his interference. He can’t make a trip to the Nether every time a foreign power asks for something that Kinoko doesn’t have, and he’s pretty sure he’s lost his divine right to rule, anyway, even if he’d wanted it. The Empress hadn’t exactly said as such, but he has a feeling that if there was any ounce left of the Warden’s magic on the castle and the ruined throne, it’s truly gone, now. It really is just a seat now.

The trip back to the castle is long, and filled with Bad jumping from concerned about their health to pissed about their wounds to happy that Karl is human again to worried about Dream to stressed about Kinoko. George would feel bad for the emotional journey that Bad is going through, but his heart is back in the doctor's office with his knights and his mind is well past any point of coherent thought.

Karl does most of the talking for him, updating Bad on what had happened in the Nether in very broad, very sanitized strokes. Where the energy comes from, George has no idea, but he’s thankful to not have to lead the conversation.

When they reach the castle, Skeppy is waiting.

“You made it.” Skeppy says nervously, eyes darting from George to Karl, and then giving them once-overs and frowning. “You two need to go to the infirmary.”

“We’re okay, Skep,” George says, accepting the hug when Skeppy draws him in. He’s warm, and familiar, and solid. George takes a second to let himself accept the comfort, and then he steps away so Skeppy can yank Karl into a hug, too. As with every time he gets some sort of positive attention from them, the hug makes Karl look like he is going to cry.

“You really aren’t.” Skeppy argues once he’s let Karl go, too. “You look like death!”

George can’t help but laugh sharply, humorless as it may be, and Karl elbows him hard to sober him up.

“It looks worse than it is.” Karl insists.

“Somehow, I doubt it.” Skeppy swallows roughly, voice stiff as he asks, “Where are the other three?”

“A doctor’s.” George assures him, “Sapnap and Q are fine. Dream got hurt, but the doctor is going to fix him up.”

“He’ll be transferred here as soon as it’s safe to move him.” Bad promises, and George knows that the words are meant to assure him as much as they are Skeppy. They don’t, for either of them.

“What kind of hurt was it?” Skeppy looks between the three of them, “Is he conscious? Why can’t he be moved now?”

“He -” George tries to answer, but he has to cut himself off. He can feel the wobble in his voice before it even escapes. He can’t say it. He can’t talk about it yet.

“He was wounded when we were in the Nether.” Karl steps in. “He’s unconscious right now, and his injuries might be infected. He’s probably in surgery right now.”

“Prime.” Skeppy reaches out for George again, taking his hand and squeezing it tight. “Thank the gods you’re all home, at least. How did you come back so quickly? We thought you’d be gone for ages.”

“Time passes differently there.” George clears his throat, manages to get himself back under control. “It’s wonky, I dunno. We were half worried we’d come out and years would be gone.”

“No such luck.” Bad clasps his shoulder, sighing, “You’re back just in time to see how this fiasco shakes out.”

“Thrilling.” George says blandly.

“Hey, listen,” Skeppy holds his hand tight again. “Just say the word. I don’t care what Bad’s promised the council, if you don’t want to do any of this, you don’t have to.”

“Skep,” Bad starts, trying to argue, but Skeppy just sends him a hard look and his mouth snaps shut.

“You wanted out, and we didn’t let you out.” Skeppy reaches up and runs a hand through George’s hair. He’s still got dried blood and whatever else in it and Skeppy’s fingers don’t make it far before meeting resistance. George flinches, but he still leans into the touch. It feels childish, needing Skeppy to just tell him things are going to be okay, but he’s so grateful that he is getting it.

“If running away twice hasn’t got it through their heads that you aren’t interested in being king, then I’ll make sure that they get it the third time.” Skeppy promises.

“Thank you,” George mutters, dropping his eyes awkwardly.

“And, while Bad is very stressed out, if you said you didn’t want to, then Bad would support you. *Right*, Bad?”

“Of course.” Bad says with a sigh. “Of course I would, George. You know that you always have me in your corner.”

Please don’t make me cry, George wants to beg. If he cries, he’s going to simply collapse into a pile and sob his eyes out until he’s got nothing left. He’d thought he’d cried enough in the maze, but it turns out his body had just enough left for another go, if he wasn’t careful.

Instead, he says, “I know.”

“Good.” Bad hesitates and then sighs again, deeper. “I’m sorry for all of this mess, George. It wasn’t fair to not tell you about your crown. We...” Bad bites his lip and then corrects, “*I* messed up. I treated you like a prince instead of my son, George.”

George blinks, mouth opening. Nothing comes out.

“You don’t have to say anything.” Bad gently shakes him, “Just...I’m sorry, kiddo. Of course I’ll support you. I never should have asked you to go to that meeting.”

“I need to talk to the arborist.” George says faintly.

Surprise settles on Bad’s features. “The royal arborist?”

“Yes.” George nods. “I fixed it.”

“Fixed...?”

“The Hermits. I fixed the issue. I need to talk to the arborist.”

“The iss - *what?*” Bad’s face scrunches up, “How?”

“Just -” George reaches up and covers Bad’s hand with his. “I didn’t go out of my way or anything, but I brought a solution back from the Nether. I need to talk to the royal arborist.”

“...okay.” Bad gives in. “I can...set that up. Now?”

“As soon as possible.”

“Maybe after a bath and some rest.” Skeppy points out. “You look like you’re about to collapse. Both of you.”

George glances at Karl, sees that he seems to be swaying on his feet.

“I’ll get you a few hours.” Bad brings George’s attention back to him. “Let’s get you and Karl a bath and some beds. I’ll send the arborist to you when you’ve had some rest and then we can...discuss how you’ve solved our issues. Okay?”

“I can’t sleep without the others.” George admits.

“Then a bath.” Skeppy insists. “I can smell the blood, George. Don’t even get me started on Karl.”

“Sorry.” Karl says quickly.

“A bath, then.” George accepts. “And then the arborist.”

“I’ll try.” Bad says, which is as good as a yes to George.

George spends two hours in a bath, scrubbing his skin and hair clean. Half way through, he has to empty and refill the tub because the water has turned cloudy with red - both dust and blood. He dirties the second bath with yet more Nether dust and blood, but he feels cleaner when he finally emerges. He thinks he may have passed out somewhere in there for a few minutes, maybe.

He shaves. None of them had shaved in the Nether and days’ worth of darkness shadows his jaw until he takes a razor to it. He feels like a new man, though a tired one, when he looks into the mirror and the patchy beard is gone, the blood and the dirt disappeared. He’s got dark bruises in some spots, scrapes along the side of his face, and his fingers ache from how badly he’d scraped the pads of them against the wall of the maze.

There is a new scar on his chest, bright red and raw looking, only inches from the other scar, which had just begun to fade. Another scar has settled lower down, at the base of his ribs. How many times can one man be impaled? At least three, apparently.

Sapnap is waiting on the other side of the door when he comes out of the washroom, enderchest still strapped to his back despite all the hubbub.

“Sapnap?” George pauses, “What?”

“We just got in.” Sapnap says by way of explanation. “Dream’s been settled into the infirmary. Skeppy is with him.”

“His eyes?”

“They’re not gone yet.” Sapnap leans back against the wall, arms crossing. “Doc Beam took a look at them and said that he needs to keep them closed until they’re finished healing before he can make any promises about a full return of vision because they were scratched and he couldn’t get a full idea of how deeply. They sewed up the wounds as best they could, and now it’s just going to be a fight against the infection that has set into one of the cuts.”

“Fuck.” George says, reaching up to cover his face. He needs to hide in the darkness for a second.

“He’s alive.” Sapnap says, voice only a bit uneven as he updates him. “It’s a bad fever. Stress and not eating or sleeping caught up to him, that’s all. Maybe he won’t keep his eyes but he...he’s gonna be alive. They’re keeping him unconscious for now so he can get a lot of sleep but they think he’ll be awake by morning.”

“He’s such an idiot.” George says, pressing harder on his eyes. They’re burning. Must be how tired he is.

“He is.” Sapnap clears his throat after his voice cracks. “But he’s our idiot. And he’s going to be fine.”

“Not when I’m through with him.” George spits. “Fucking idiot. Fucking *idiot*.”

“Doctor Star has a really nasty medicine that he’s gotta smear all over his face for the next, like, month, so we’re gonna get some payback for the scare.” Sapnap tries to comfort him, but George can *hear* the wobble in his voice and it just starts to set George off, too.

“I hate him.” George groans. “I do, I hate him. I hate him.”

“You don’t.” Sapnap laughs and then there are arms around George’s shoulders and George clings, hugging Sapnap back tight, tight, tight as relief courses through him.

Sapnap is right, though George is loath to admit it at the moment. He couldn’t hate Dream anymore than he could change his vision. George doesn’t have words for how much he loves Dream; it’s a universal constant. What was it that XD had said, that first time they’d met?

George would know Dream no matter what. In a crowd of millions, George would find him unerringly. If they were specks of stardust, George would be able to pick Dream’s out of them all. Whatever, George can’t remember the exact words but the *sentiment* is there.

George can’t think about XD right now. His heart aches for both of them.

“Come on, dude,” Sapnap pats his back. “I’m getting you all dirty again, you just bathed.”

“You hugged me, dick,” George *tsks* and pushes away, blinking hard to stop his vision from swimming. “Is Quackity still with him?”

“Yeah, and Jimmy. Chandler and Chris are with Karl, now. He’s going to take over for Quackity when he’s done cleaning up.”

“Good.” George shakes his shoulders out. “Hopefully they’re helping to scrub him down. He was so gross even Skeppy pointed it out.”

“They’d better not be,” Sapnap frowns, perking up, “Do you think they are?”

“Oh, for sure,” George nods, “Can’t keep their hands off him.”

“Stop.” Sapnap crosses his arms again, “You’re just trying to piss me off, what the fuck.”

“No, I’m serious,” George starts walking and Sapnap follows at his heels, “I think they’re trying to take him back.”

“George! This isn’t funny!”

“I’m not being funny!”

“You are, and it’s not working! I’m going to go check on him.”

“No, you’re going to stay with me because I have to go talk to the royal arborist in my mother’s study and I outrank your fiance being felt up by his besties right now.”

“You sure the fuck do not outrank that!”

“Relax, relax, I’m joking. Mostly.”

“George!”

They bicker as they walk, their feet leading them on a familiar path toward the throne room and the study. The conversation shifts from Karl and his bathing adventures with his guild to a fight about which shoes are appropriate for castle exploring, somehow, and it’s that conversation that follows them as they pass the throne room.

A part of George wants to peek inside. That room is the room he lost Dream in and the room he lost XD in, and the room he got Dream back in, and the room he’d grown up watching his mother and father rule in. That room houses the remains of a throne that had haunted him his entire life and, ultimately, stole his parents from him, and nearly succeeded in taking Dream, too. It’s a dead chair, now, and that’s by George’s doing - twice. An evil that has plagued his family for generations, finally put to rest.

He lets Sapnap urge him past without looking, and he doesn’t regret it.

He wishes that he could avoid the study as much as he’d avoided the throne room but, unfortunately, it feels right to have this discussion about the future of Kinoko in the study that his mother had worked out of.

George isn’t sure when the arborist is meant to come; Bad had only promised that it would be soon after George sent for him, and George had done that just before he’d shaved so he could avoid a long wait in the damn study.

Their fighting dies down when they reach the door. He pauses, feeling almost like an invisible barrier stops him from moving forward, and Sapnap pauses at his side. He doesn't say anything, and George appreciates it while he gathers his thoughts.

"I saw them." He says, eventually. "I don't remember anything else. I just remember seeing them. They wanted me to stay, but I knew Dream was lost and needed me. So I left."

"I remember them, too." Sapnap says carefully. "It figures that we'd go to the same place. After, I mean."

"Yeah." George says, mouth dry. "I'm just surprised they were there. I wonder if they were waiting."

"Maybe." Sapnap says, and, honestly, what else could he say? George doesn't blame him.

"I should have hunted her book down, when we were in Kristin's library." George says as he reaches out, past the invisible barrier, and opens the door. He steps inside, pushing aside a myriad of feelings that he doesn't have the time or emotional wherewithal to handle at the moment.

"Maybe we can get Tommy to steal it for us the next time he goes to visit her."

"You think he would?"

"Oh, for sure," Sapnap nods, shutting the door behind them, "Just get Dream to ask."

George huffs in amusement, letting the subject drop. He wanders the study, poking and prodding at different books and shelves, doing his best to not stare at the dark marks on the wall that so perfectly outlined where fire had taken the room.

Most of these books are familiar, he realizes. He'd spent quite a while just wandering this room, pretending he wasn't paying attention to his mother's lectures to try to piss her off and get some sort of reaction. He'd read the spines, dragged his fingers along them, memorized the dips and grooves in the oldest of them. Figures that she'd have fireproofed her shelves to save her books.

"Oh." he says, letting his finger rest on a well-worn cover. "I didn't know this was here."

"What?" Sapnap joins him, looking at the book under his touch with a frown, "Is that a history book?"

"Yeah," George carefully pulls it from the shelf. "It's a family tree of sorts. This book goes back generations. I'll bet we could even figure out which of these numbskulls is the one that made the deal with the Warden."

"Damn," Sapnap snorts when George carefully opens the front cover and the crack in the spine makes itself known, the cover almost separating entirely from the body of the book if not for George's careful handling. "It's ancient."

“It’s well-used. My father would read to me from this book nearly every day. We’d finish the whole thing in a few months, and then we’d start again. It’s how I was supposed to memorize my family.”

“Did it work?”

“Fuck no.” George laughs, thinking back. His father had finally retired the reading hour when George had turned thirteen. By then, George had created a cheat sheet that he’d read over and memorize just before his lessons so he could recite it and then forget it until the next time he’d have to recite. His dad, he thinks, had caught on, but as long as George could answer in the moment, he’d never been punished. Besides, his father hadn’t had any room to stand on with regards to the integrity of the history of the family he’d married into.

“He used to edit the stories.” George explains, taking the book and sitting on the couch. He lays it in his lap and carefully flips the first page open. It’s the family tree he’d mentioned. His name is lined at the bottom with severe ink. If he’d decided to have children, there would only be room for another generation or two before they’d have needed to paste in another page. Good thing the Empress had taken care of that for him. A stroke of luck.

Sapnap joins him, collapsing into the other side of the couch. “Edit them how?”

“Make them less...bloody.” George smiles as he traces the branches of the trees. He doesn’t have any cousins, except, perhaps, for some rather distant members of the Snowchester court. Only a handful of monarchs had had multiple children that had made it to the age where they’d have kids of their own, and their lines had died out fairly quickly. It was just him, now. The last of his bloodline.

“Skeppy made my family history *more* bloody.” Sapnap recalls casually, tilting his head back on the cushion.

“If only they’d collaborated. We’d have a perfectly balanced story of violence.” George flips the page to the table of contents. This book had been a living document once, and he can see his mother’s handwriting at the bottom of the list, outlining the story of her own mother. It would have been George’s job, once he was crowned, to continue it. His first week would have been spent with this book, writing the story of his mother’s leadership into the pages.

Her section sits empty, he knows. George hadn’t given even a thought to this book in all this time. He hadn’t forgotten about it, so much as he’d decided that it wasn’t ever the time to think about it.

He hadn’t ever wanted the crown, but especially not after the coup. He hadn’t ever wanted to have to write her story. He hadn’t imagined that he would; he’d just...whatever. It hadn’t been the top of his priority list, when he’d been thinking about running away for so long before the coup.

He flips to the end of his grandmother’s tale. The page after her’s ends is empty. Not even his mother’s name adorns it. He traces it into the page with his nail, though nothing shows up under his touch.

He sighs.

“Useless.” He mutters to himself. He flips through the book one last time, perhaps rougher than intended, as he stands up to return to the shelf. As he stands, the pages quickly separating under his thumb, a familiar bookmark George had completely forgotten existed flutters out and lands on the ground.

As he looks down at it between his feet, he remembers. His father, sitting on the couch that had originally furnished this room, with George next to him, reading the words aloud and using his bookmark to follow the lines. George had always liked the bookmark; it was on pretty paper, tinted robin’s egg blue, and neatly folded into a perfect rectangle, thin and flat with folds so sharp that George hadn’t even realized they were folds until years after first seeing it. What had always caught his attention was that, depending on which side his father had laid down, he could sometimes see the writing there. Written in an elegant font that he’d only now realized was his mother’s, *‘My Dearest Child’* had been scrawled.

The endearment stares up at him now.

There’s a knock at the door.

“That’ll be the tree doctor.” Sapnap says. “George?”

“Can you get the door?” George asks faintly, kneeling down to pick up the bookmark.

It’s just a bit heavier than he expects. The paper is thin but still holding strong. He spots the small drop of wax he remembers. It’s not a bookmark, he realizes.

“Your Majesty.” A man says, drawing George’s attention away from the letter in his hand.

George doesn’t recognize this arborist. He’s wearing a red top, tucked into straight-laced slacks, and does not at all look like he spends hours at a time studying and caring for trees.

“Hello.” George carefully slides the letter into his pocket and gives his full attention to his guest. “You’re the royal arborist? I thought she was...older.”

“My mentor retired last year.” The man smiles, a flash of teeth, and bows politely. “I’ve taken the post, Your Majesty. Montero, at your service.”

“It’s nice to see some new blood in the service of Kinoko. I’d begun to think that only people the age of my parents and over were going to participate in running this place.” George smiles quickly, earning himself a laugh.

“We’ve got a new team.” Montero explains, “Ages across the board. To your liking, perhaps.”

“I’m sure.” George motions to the couch, moving to lean against the desk. Sapnap stands at the door, silent and watching. “Sit, please, Montero. I’ve got a job and I’m not sure that your team and the dirt scientists will be able to make it happen, but I’m really hoping you can.”

“The pedologists, King George?”

“Sure,” George says easily. “The dirt doctors.”

“The dirt doctors.” Montero gives in, obviously holding back another grin. George likes him, the easy confidence and lack of intimidation. Is this what two years without a monarch accomplished? He can’t remember ever seeing any courtiers or members of government smiling at his mother.

“I went on an...expedition.” George begins. “And I’ve found something. I’m hoping that your team can make it sustainable. I’ve collected fresh soil and I bring you a handful of saplings. I need these trees to be successful. Break down the soil or whatever you need to do, but I want these trees to have their own yard in the next decade.”

“Well,” Montero hesitates, “I can’t...promise that, Your Majesty. But we’ll do our best.”

“That’s good enough for me.” George says with relief and motions for Sappap to bring him the enderchest.

He shuffles what’s inside around, pulling out the pots of dirt and then the saplings, still wrapped in a blanket, careful not to crush them as he lays the blanket out on the table and unrolls it enough to show the arborist the pale blue sapling.

“It’s *blue*?” Montero demands, standing up sharply when he sees it.

“It’s blue. And, until I’ve talked to the council, it’s between us and your team.” George says firmly. “Understood?”

“Sir, if you say that we’ll get to take a crack at actually growing that thing, we’ll pay *you* for our silence!”

George chuckles, removing a single sapling and rewrapping the rest. He pushes the blanket toward Montero.

“No need for that. Go wild. Do your best. The economy of the country could depend on this tree, but no pressure.”

“No pressure.” Montero laughs incredulously and sweeps the saplings under one arm. He carefully balances both pots of red dirt with the other arm, still standing. “Was there more, Your Majesty?”

“More dirt? No, that’s it.”

“More information, sir.” Montero snorts. “Am I free to leave with my prizes?”

“Oh. Yes. Yeah, dismissed. ”

Montero curtsies instead of bowing, practically vibrating in his excitement, and then disappears from the room without a backward glance, already obviously lost in the idea of the future.

“That went well.” Sappap says. “Do you think he’ll actually keep it a secret?”

“Like I could give a shit about that,” George flaps, “Shut the door, shut the door!”

Sapnap blinks in bewilderment but shuts the door, flipping the lock for good measure.
“What? I thought you wanted it to be a secret?”

“I don’t care.” George carefully pulls the letter from his pocket, sitting hurriedly back down on the couch and then finding himself lost for what to do next. He feels like he’s finally gone mad. All of the last few weeks, and this is what’s finally pushed him over the edge.

“George?” Sapnap asks, his voice worried. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” George says immediately. “Nothing’s *wrong*.”

“Okay, then what’s going on?” Sapnap joins him, carefully sitting next to him. “What is that?”

“It fell out of the book.” George makes himself say. “It was my dad’s bookmark.”

“Is it okay?” Sapnap frowns, leaning in to get a closer look, “It didn’t get dirty, did it?”

“No.” George carefully flips it over so Sapnap can see the small dot of wax. It’s a wax seal, minus any elegant pattern. “I just...I think it’s a letter.”

“*What?* Like from your dad!?”

“My mother, actually.” George flips the letter again, the slope of the endearment faded against the pale blue of the paper. “He used this for as long as I can remember. It’s older than you are.”

Sapnap blanches. “Holy shit. You never noticed it was a letter?”

“What do you think?” George asks, swallowing roughly as he slides the tip of his nail along the bottom of the drop of wax. He feels the seam. How easy it would be to break it.

“Are you going to open it?” Sapnap drops his voice, as if they might be discovered.

“I mean, it’s addressed to me, right? Probably.” George reasons, matching his tone.

“Unless you have a secret brother or something.”

“Oh good,” George scoffs, “He can be king instead.”

His nail worries the seal, sliding just the barest bit underneath. The wax separates from the paper with the movement, just that tiniest hint. He wants to open it. He’s worried it’s going to crumble to dust in his hands if he does.

“Do you want me to -” Sapnap starts to say, but George cuts him off, sending him a sharp glare.

“If you leave me alone right now, I’m going to punch you in the face.”

“Noted.” Sapnap says, elbowing him gently. “Come on. Open it, then.”

“I can’t just *open* it.”

“Why not? It’s just a letter.”

“Yeah,” George swallows, “Just a letter. From my mother. To me. Probably.”

“Do you want me to open it for you?”

“*No.*”

“Then you do it, dude!”

“Stop rushing me! This is - this is big! This is a big moment!”

“I know! That’s why I want you to do it!”

“Relax! I need to take my time, I need to -”

“George!” Sapnap lurches forward as if to grab the letter and, in a panic, George slides his nail under the wax seal and breaks it.

They both freeze, staring down at the letter in George’s hands with trepidation.

“You’re such an asshole.” George pinches Sapnap roughly and Sapnap full-body flinches despite there being little weight behind the touch.

“I’m an instigator, it’s in my blood. What does it say?” Sapnap demands, pinching him back. Though the pain isn’t much, George immediately understands why Sapnap had flinched so hard; his body is still prepared for the worst of wounds and the pinch, while not hurting, jolts through him. Fucker.

“Let me *read* it, and I’ll *tell* you, you nosy fuck.”

Sapnap subsides and George takes a deep, steadying breath.

He wishes Dream were here.

His fingers shake minutely as he carefully lifts the first fold. Words appear on the side that had been hidden by the folds. The handwriting is familiar, a faint gray from age even if the ink hasn’t seen light in at least two decades.

He unfolds the second half, leaving the creased paper laid out and bare to him.

She’s filled it, from the top to the bottom, in her elegant script.

George swallows, eyes trailing over the whole thing, not reading so much as recognizing that there are words. He returns his eyes to the top.

My dearest child, it starts.

“This can’t be for me.” He says.

“What other dearest child is there?” Sapnap argues, though his voice is soft and distracted. George knows he’s reading ahead.

George makes himself continue reading, too. He has to know what it says.

My dearest child, the letter begins.

A few days ago, I didn’t know you existed. A few hours ago, I still had a mother, and a husband. Now, one is dead and the other has been taken to such inhospitable a land that he might as well be. Fear not, my dearest. This letter’s end marks the beginning of my reign as Queen. I will get your father back and return the three of us home, and one day you shall read this letter and you will laugh, and I will laugh, and I will hold you all in my arms.

At least, that is my hope. I know that this mission will not come without cost, unfortunately. The throne has little mind for keeping families together, so I must do my best to prevent my fate from being yours. I will not have you grow up without a mother or a father. My first duty will always be to you, dearest.

Duty, once again. Allow me, if you don’t mind, to work my thoughts out in this letter to you. Duty has haunted me for my entire life. As a child, young and spoiled and selfish, my idea of duty was so immature. Dreams of a crown and fawning peasants and proclamations followed to the letter, just as my mother’s were. If I teach you just one thing, dearest, let it be not the duty taught to me by my royal education, but the duty taught to me by the stablehand who became my knight. Let it be the duty that your father helped me to realize I had to this land and its people. Our people.

The dedication of a true heart to the betterment of the people I owe my existence to is what should guide me now, as your grandmother would remind me, and I’m sure that your father would agree, the bleeding soul. But I am still that selfish princess at heart, and it is my duty to you, and to your father; to both of whom I made a promise to protect and cherish, that will guide my hand.

“George.” Sapnap says, shocking George out of his stupor. He realizes that there are hands on his; that he’s holding the letter so tightly that he’s going to tear it. It’s only Sapnap’s grip on his that has stopped him from ripping it apart.

“I think I’m going to be sick.” George says faintly, mind whirring.

“Not on the letter,” Sapnap tugs his sleeve to his fingers and uses it to wipe George’s forehead. The touch makes George realize that he’s sweltering. He’s on fire, it feels like. Maybe another bath is in order.

“She wrote it before she went to the Nether. Before she made her deal for her crown.” George lets go of the letter with one hand, clutches at Sapnap’s wrist to anchor himself. Sapnap lets him, not complaining at all about the desperate strength George is using.

“We don’t have to read this right now.” Sapnap reminds him. “We have it forever, now that we know about it. We can hold off.”

“No.” George breathes out shakily. “I wanted answers, didn’t I? How many times have I wondered why she let the Warden steal the soul from her eyes? She’s telling me, right now, and I don’t think I’ll have the nerve to read this again if I leave it.”

“Okay.” Sapnap relents. “If you feel like you need to, then you need to. Just remember that it’s over. The throne’s gone. What it did in the past can’t be changed, but we stopped it from ever doing it again.”

George nods sharply and then reluctantly continues reading, trying to keep himself more in-tune with his body this time. He breathes in and out to a familiar rhythm, hoping that it will help him to stay present and not lost in the horrific moment that his mother had written this letter

I know that your presence should make me hesitate and rethink my next steps. I have a responsibility to the people, and it is a duty that I’ve always been proud to one day take from my mother when her time came to an end. It is both my divine right and my divine burden, passed down by the magic which gives us our crown, to lead our people into peace and prosperity. But I think, my dearest, that it is your presence that reminds me I cannot perform that duty without your father, who taught me the truth of it in the first place. I was barely a child when my mother became Queen, and my own father was taken. I didn’t understand why, at the time, he was gone without so much as a goodbye. I know now he had no choice. That to rule, my mother must rule alone. I saw what that did to her. I know what it did to me. I cannot, in good conscience, allow that to happen to either of us.

For this reason, I must bring him back. He’d not forgive me for abandoning my duty to the people, and I could not forgive myself for abandoning my duty to the two of you, so a compromise must be made and I am willing to make it. I will not make the same deal that my mother did - there must be another way. I’ll find it, I swear, and I will give you a life with both parents, and, perhaps, an example of how to avoid being torn by your duty to your people and your heart.

Regardless of what I must sacrifice to achieve this goal, I need to convey to you nothing else more important than this, my child. My Georgiana, if you are a girl, or my George, if you are a boy: you are loved. I love you so much it seems my heart would burst from it, and I haven’t even met you yet. I love you and your father more than even my kingdom, and I hope that I can show you that with every day that we spend together. I hope I have a lifetime with you, and that I can teach you to be smart in all the ways that I am not. I hope that I live for many, many years, so that the burden of the crown and the throne does not fall on your head at so young an age as it does on mine. I hope that you find someone to share it with, like I have your father. I hope that you are able to define what your duty is, and when the throne calls, as it will, that you choose what is right. I know you will.

You are my heart,

Loraine ~~Queen Loraine~~ HH Your Mother

George reads the letter. And then he reads it again, and finally, a third time, this time mouthing along to the words that his mother had put down in ink, so long ago.

You are my heart.

“George?” Sapnap’s hand on his shoulder makes him jump, “George, hey, it’s okay.”

“It’s.” George swallows, tries to make his words form, “*Damn* it.”

“That’s an intense letter.” Sapnap says carefully.

“No shit.” George hiccups a laugh, carefully setting the letter down on the table and leaning on his knees, putting his face in his hands. “She was an intense woman.”

“She was.” Sapnap concedes. “And now you know. The throne took your dad, and she got him back. She made a different deal. I guess that’s what really happened to your grandfather.”

George nods, though he’d always known that that was what happened to his grandfather. It had been what he eventually told Dream about, when he’d come clean about the throne.

They’d been in his bed, curtains drawn to hide them from the world, skin still sweaty and bare from the two of them making the most of their time together, hands intertwined as George listened to Dream’s steady heartbeat slowing from the hummingbird wings of lovemaking to the gentle drumming of rest. And George had realized that, if something happened to his mother, and the throne took Dream as it had taken his grandfather, there would be no moving forward for him. He’d *had* to tell Dream, to warn him and to impress upon him how very important it was that they left, because Dream had always doubted, a bit, the idea of taking George away from his royal life and into the life of a peasant. It had been the first time he’d ever admitted the truth about the throne, had ever fought past the fear of what might happen because he *had* to make sure that Dream and Sapnap were safe, or he wouldn’t have been able to go on.

George had thought himself different from the monarchs before him. The idea of moving on, leading a country, after the throne stole the most precious person in the world from him? That idea had been unbearable. Inconceivable. But, obviously, his mother had felt the same. She’d never told him that this kind of deal was an option, though. Had she regretted the one she’d made, that saved her husband and turned her into the queen that George knew?

“My dad used to say that I reminded him of her.” George says, and to his horror, feels a lump in his throat, “I didn’t know why. She was stand-off-ish and distant and didn’t care about anything but ruling the country and sitting on the throne. She barely spoke to me unless it was to teach me some new skill. It would make me so damn mad, when he said that, because he always looked sad when he did.”

“The person who wrote that doesn’t sound like the queen I remember.” Sapnap squeezes his shoulder. “Whatever deal she made with the Warden, it changed her. I can see why he’d be sad.”

“Yeah.” George agrees, his throat dry like sand.

Had it happened for her like it happened for him? His grandmother had died unexpectedly, an unfortunate fall from her horse during a ride. It had been an ignoble death for so intimidating a woman, George had heard, though he'd never met her. Had the Warden appeared to take his father before his mother had even had a moment to process her own mother's death? With George in her womb and his father in the Nether, had the newly-crowned queen had even a moment to truly understand what was happening? To think at all, before reacting?

"This person doesn't sound like the kind of woman who would assign two children as sacrifices." George says, thinking out loud. "She doesn't sound like the kind of person who would only speak to me when I had the circlet on. Who never dined with us unless we joined her for official business. Who only ever wanted to be on the throne. What could the Warden have taken from her, to turn this person into who raised me and headhunted you and Dream to die for me?"

You are my heart.

"Whatever it was," Sapnap sighs. "It was a trade she thought was worth it, for your dad. And for your best interest. It's fucked up, don't get me wrong, but she brought Dream and I here to keep you safe. To, maybe, make it easier, if the throne took one of us. You'd still have the other."

"Instead of a spare heir, she made a spare sacrifice." George summarizes, stomach swooping sickly at the thought. He grabs Sapnap, stupidly afraid that he might disappear right out from under George's nose if he isn't careful.

"The Warden definitely didn't take her brain, that's for sure."

"Her heart, then." George decides. "He took her heart."

"Maybe." Sapnap allows. "But it was a trade that was worth it to her. For you."

"It was fucked." George says simply, but he knows that, were he in her shoes, and it was Sapnap or Dream under the thumb of the throne, he would have probably done the exact same thing she did. Damn, maybe his father was right after all.

"Why didn't he give this to me?" George finds himself asking, staring at the innocent page laying on the table. "What was his excuse? He didn't have to give up shit. Why wasn't *he* better?"

"...you saw how the Nether changes people. Who knows what happened to him there?" Sapnap sighs. "I wish I could have the answers for you, man. I really do. Maybe he just wanted to wait until you were older, and he never got the chance to give it to you. Maybe he just wanted to keep the proof that she wasn't always...how she was, to himself, for a while. That she loved, once."

You are my heart.

George frowns, looking down at his hands, now tightly clasped in his lap, and then up at the ceiling. His eyes search for the crack, as yet another droplet of water falls and lands on the

ridge of his knuckles.

He can't find the crack, but more droplets come. He snuffles. Figures that this damn castle is full of leaks.

"George." Sapnap says, and George hears the sadness. The leak worsens. George groans.

"I'm not doing this." He says firmly, though his voice is uneven as he says it. "They d-died. They died two years ago. They died. They died, and I'm fine. I'm over it. I've processed it. They died, but they were shitty parents, and they were shitty monarchs, honestly, and they were shitty *people* for what they did to you and Dream and -"

George chokes on the words, swallowing thickly and then having to clear his throat roughly. His first breath after is hitching and painful. He tries again, to similar results, and then another, and another, until he's doubled over trying to breathe past the pain in his chest.

"She loved me." He sobs, heavy. "She *loved* me."

"I've got you," Sapnap promises, sniffing himself, always the sympathetic crier, "You can cry, man, I got you."

Why now? George wants to scream. Why can't it be over? Why am I still so sad to lose people I didn't even know? Why does it hurt, still, when I still have the people I love most with me? Am I damned to miss people I don't remember for the rest of my life?

He doesn't know why this broke him. His parents have been gone for years, now, and had been distant figures rather than parents for most of his life. More like employers for a future job he never wanted than parents. Not like Skeppy and Bad; not like the parents in the stories. He loved them distantly, and they loved him the same.

Except, once, they hadn't. Except, once, for a briefest of moments, his mother had loved him like she was supposed to. She'd had a fierce love for him, and her husband, and the people of Kinoko as *people*. Except, once, she'd made choices that George could relate to, that George could see *himself* making, if he'd been in her place.

I hope I have a lifetime with you, she'd written. *You are my heart*, she'd wanted him to know, before she lost it.

Sapnap holds him, and George cries. The letter has forced him to confront the loss of what little he *had* managed to get from his parents in all his years with them, and has forced him to see all that he'd never had to lose, and George can't tell which is worse. He mourns for it all.

In the end, when he's all cried out, Bad finds them. The Hermits have been appeased for now, waiting for his arrival, the promise that he is in fact coming, and isn't about to skip out on another meeting.

"We can wait, though," Bad says kindly where he's sitting on George's other side, patting his leg comfortingly.

“You sound like Skeppy,” George scoffs, clearing the tears from his throat.

“I hope so,” Bad smiles, small, “He’s very smart. And he is right about this. I don’t want to push you right now, George. Even all scrubbed up, you look like poop.”

“Thanks,” George says blandly. “I miss Dream. He says I look good all the time, where is that energy from you guys?”

“Dream’s wearing the rose-tinted glasses.” Sapnap teases, ruffling George’s hair to make him smack at his hands.

“Boys,” Bad interrupts, stilling their fighting, “Stop fighting. George, I can push them off until the morning so you can get some rest.”

“No.” George quiets down, looking at the now-folded letter in his hands. He’d let Bad read it, and then he’d let Bad hug him tight enough to bruise, and then he’d folded it up neatly with the knowledge that he would probably never read it again. He’s not at peace with what happened. There’s rage in him about the coup; toward Wilbur and Schlatt and Eret for their parts in his parents’ death, and there’s rage in him about his parents, the deal his mom made and his father’s lack of care after their return, what they did to Dream and Sapnap and *their* families. He’s angry. He’s guilty, too, that he hadn’t lived up to his mother’s desire. She’d hoped that he would be a man of duty, one that recognized his responsibilities to Kinoko and made the best choices for the people he governed.

Well. George is not. He doesn’t regret it, nor will he change it. But, perhaps, this one time, he can live up to her expectations. He can help the country, just once, before he ends the rule of his family for good.

And as for the anger...there will be no closure. This letter is all he’s ever going to get, and it has to be enough. It will be, maybe, one day. For now, he folds it up and he stands and puts it in his pocket.

“I want to get the Hermits taken care of, for now, and then I’m going to the infirmary to sit with Dream. I don’t want him to wake up alone.”

“I peeked in on them and Karl and Quackity are doing a good job of keeping him entertained. Karl was reading to him when I stopped by.” Bad assures him, and that does make George feel better, that they’re keeping Dream company while he’s busy. Still, he itches to hold Dream’s hand, to feel his pulse.

“I bet he’s reading him dirty stories now that Dream isn’t awake to tell him off for it.” Sapnap muses and, yes, that does sound like Karl.

“Then I’d better hurry this along to go save him from the softcore porn your fiance consumes.” George snorts, brushing his clothes off. His new clothes are dirty from being so close to Sapnap now, but he doesn’t care *that* much. If the Hermits haven’t figured out that he’s a failure of a royal by now, then they’re not worth dressing up for anyway.

“It’s not softcore.” Sapnap laments.

“Okay,” Bad says dubiously, “We can talk to the Hermits, if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” George nods, steadying himself against the heavy burden of exhaustion. Just a bit more to go, he knows, and he’ll be free to crawl into Dream’s infirmary bed and listen to his heartbeat until he can sleep. Perhaps he’ll even be too exhausted to have nightmares.

Sapnap stands to join them. “Let’s get it done, then, I guess.”

“You hated politics,” George smiles. “You don’t have to come.”

“I still hate politics, don’t get me wrong,” Sapnap says, “But if you think I’m going to let you go alone to this thing when Dream is out of commission -”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll punch me.” George gives in, “Come on, then. We can see the others, after.”

As rushed as it is, only so many council members are able to make it to the courthouse on a few hours notice. He recognises Tina, the young woman who spoke up before, shuffling papers at the table, and she gives him a small smile. A handful of other council members scatter around the room, looking confused and annoyed and hopeful in equal number.

The Hermits are present, talking amongst themselves. Despite them apparently being pissed at his disappearance, they give him polite smiles before turning back to their own conversations when he enters the courthouse with Bad and Sapnap to either side of him.

Scar gives him a slightly longer look at the others, before shooting him a thumbs up and turning away. George wonders what part of his appearance had garnered that reaction.

He strolls forward this time, faking confidence as he takes his seat and Sapnap stands where Dream stood last time, his stance identical as he glares out over the council people, daring anyone to say anything with him at George’s side.

“First of all,” George says, once Bad calls the meeting to attention, “I want to apologize for my...hasty departure, last time we met. I know you have come a long way, for me, but there were prior commitments that could not be rescheduled. I won’t get into details but, while I was indisposed with those commitments, I found a potential solution to our concern. Stumbled into it, really.”

George takes a deep breath, “I was thinking about what you said, about what resources you may find equitable. You mentioned a desire for blue wood. While our birch wood could be stained, I’ve found a more natural solution; I found wood, in fact. Blue wood. Naturally grown and potentially harvestable. I was able to bring back a few saplings and samples,” he motions and Bad hands him the single sapling he’d kept back from Montero, which he presents with aplomb, “and I’ve passed them onto our arborists, as well as the soil they grow in to our...” He pauses, because *dirt scientists* isn't the most appropriate thing to say in a council where someone is dutifully writing down everything you’re saying.

“Pedologists.” Sapnap whispers lowly.

“Our pedologists.” George continues, shooting Sapnap a silent thank you, “And they’ve been given the task to cultivate them as soon as possible. It might be a bit of a slow start, but if we can, you’ll get exclusive access to them for ten years. Reduced cost, first time buyers discount, all of that, as long as you continue to supply us with the redstone we need for the next decade.”

“I’d like to take a closer look.” Mumbo requests and George concedes, handing the sapling to Sapnap with a nod. Sapnap takes it to the envoy and holds it up for their viewing, though his cutting stare stops them from reaching for it.

“Fascinating...” Grian says, quiet enough that George thinks it was on accident.

“This is quite the find. I must ask, though, what the policy would be should your harvesting efforts fail.” Mumbo asks; more curiosity than genuine concern in his voice, “If you fail to make these trees grow, then we’ll have given you something for nothing at all.”

“You’ll receive a map.” George says. “We know exactly where these saplings were harvested. If our samples fail to thrive within Kinoko, you’ll receive the coordinates to the location of the original forest and you can set out to retrieve as much lumber as you’re willing to collect, provided you can get to the trees.”

“And which biome, exactly, do these trees originate from?” Grian asks. He’s a little more suspicious, eyes narrowing and head tilting like the bird his wings emulate as he looks at the sapling and then George, “I’ve never heard of any trees that supply blue wood.”

“As you can see, they’re real.” George says as Sapnap emphatically holds up the sapling for better viewing., “But I’ll be keeping the biome to myself, for now. Unless Kinoko fails to create a nursery for these saplings, the secret is one that belongs to our government. I can say that where these saplings come from is dangerous and inhospitable. I wouldn’t recommend anyone travel there, least of all for trees that we may be able to provide, given enough time.”

“You know, Grian,” Scar says, his eyes shining and a small grin on his face, “Thinking about it, I’ve heard Cub talking about trees like this before. You know he’s been all over, and he’s not one to straight out lie. If they do manage to make them grow here, it would be perfect for the build you’ve been working on. And mine! And Pearl’s house! Oh my gosh, they really would be perfect for -”

“Scar. Mumbo raised a good point.” Grian says, gently interrupting his friend. “If they can’t, then we’ll have to go retrieve them ourselves, from a dangerous and inhospitable biome.”

“You seem relatively unharmed after such an expedition, Your Majesty.” Mumbo points out, “Maybe it is not truly the *most* dangerous and inhospitable place.”

George quirks a wry smile. “Don’t be deceived. I did not leave unscathed, nor did my companions. But, if our nursery fails, the map we give you will be of the safest route we have. Not *safe*,” he stresses, “But *safest*.”

“See, Grian!” Scar says, outright beaming now, “We’ll have a map! And besides, when have you been one to turn down the chance at a little adventure?”

“Fine,” Grian acquiesces, “I see your points. But you -” He points at Scar, “you, mister, are not coming. You are far too good at getting yourself into dangerous situations.”

“Me?” Scar says, mock offended, “I would *never* -”

“Boys,” Mumbo says, clearing his throat, “If you would stop bickering for a moment, please.” He turns back to George, “To be clear, you’ll provide us with the logs that we need at a discounted rate compared to wherever else you might export them for the next ten years, and in return, we continue to provide you the redstone you need?”

“If we can get them growing, you can have as much as you want that we can provide,” George says, “And if we have not managed to succeed in one year’s time, you get the map drawn by the knight that led us through this biome himself. But I have full confidence in the team here; they seemed very excited to get to work on it.”

“I look forward to meeting them,” Grian says, “Mumbo here has worked a lot with trees and our arborists, maybe he can give them some pointers.”

“That would be very helpful,” George admits. “I know this isn’t the most...conventional solution.”

“Well, you don’t seem to be the most conventional king,” Mumbo says, “How’s that going, by the way? The abdication?”

“As soon as possible,” George says, with a glance towards Bad, “The council will work out the exact rate of exchange for redstone versus our wood so we know how much we might owe you in backlog for this year’s failure to meet expense demands, and I will sign the declaration so that we can put this matter to rest immediately. With my official abdication, all matters which my forefathers or I presided over will fall to the council.”

“Tina,” Bad says, motioning, and George sees Tina jump, eyes going big and wide as she looks up from where she’d been frantically scribbling on her notepad. “You’ll meet with the envoy today to discuss exchange rates and have a report to me the moment you reach consensus. We’ll write it into a contract and have this all signed. With any luck, this matter will be put to rest within the month.”

Mumbo smiles as Tina sutters out a “Y-Yes, Ambassador!” and George doesn’t let himself sigh in relief or relax. Instead, he watches as Bad dismisses the council and they all file out. Only when the last person is gone does he stand on legs made of jelly.

“I want to see Dream, now.” He says, and Bad is already nodding before he even finishes the phrase.

With the last of his resolve being put toward making sure his knees don’t give out, George leaves the courthouse for what he hopes is the last time, Sapnap at his side and the both of them determined to make it back to Dream before anything else tries to keep them away.

Dream hurts, but the hurt is far away.

It's less of a hurt, and more that he is aware that he is experiencing the concept of hurt. His brain knows it is happening, but he doesn't feel it.

He hears breathing, quiet conversation. There is something heavy on his chest. His hands are both full, warmth encompassing them.

He tries to open his eyes, but can only manage to crack one open. He sees only darkness.

Dream breathes in and out. The concept of pain sharpens into something more concrete. It centers in his head, specifically his face, though the rest of him is no laughing matter, either.

His hands twitch, the urge to reach up and see what covers his eyes overwhelming his desire to stay still and sleep some more.

"Dream?" A voice calls, far away and then closer as it says, "Are you waking up?"

Sapnap.

Dream hums, grumbly and low, to show that he's listening. Is something wrong? He feels calm. The air around him feels calm. Sapnap sounds calm, his voice quiet. Hearing him is a comfort that fills Dream with contentment. If Sapnap is here, then he's safe. It's okay if he doesn't wake up immediately. He can drift.

"Hey, buddy," Sapnap says and the warmth around one of his hands constricts lightly, squeezing his fingers. "Hey. Are you ready to wake up?"

Dream grumbles, wanting to say no but knowing he should say yes, and he hears Sapnap chuckle.

"It's okay if you want to sleep. We'll be here when you wake up, just like last time."

Dream doesn't remember a last time. He doesn't remember - much, actually. He tries to remember.

He remembers a maze. He'd been scared, and hurting, and upset. They'd been walking, and they'd seen something awful. He'd argued with Sapnap, and then Sapnap had been attacked and all he could think about was protecting him. After that, things are hazy. He has a memory of a great weight on his shoulders, of more terror. He remembers shadowy figures in masks, and those husks. He remembers grief and glowing red eyes. All of it is far away, and it upsets him but not too much. It's stuff he can worry about later.

"Dream?" A new voice says his name. This voice is like lighting all the lanterns in a home, chasing away the darkness. George.

"George." He tries to say back, but his tongue is dry and heavy, so it comes out stiff and slow.

"He's awake," George says, his tone turning anxious, "Q, water, please."

The weight on his Dream's chest lifts. He's sorry to feel it go; he's cold, immediately, and he frowns at the feeling.

He hears gentle clinking, feels a shift around him as the warmth he hadn't even realized was all along his side pulls away and moves. He squeezes both hands, not sure who he's holding on to with which, and gets a gentle hushing for it. The cool lip of a glass is pressed to his lips only a second later.

"Drink." George says, and Dream rarely finds the strength to deny him what he wants. Now, Dream feels so weak that he can't even open his eyes, let alone fight. He drinks. The water is sweet and cool, soothing his dry mouth and throat almost immediately. He sips the water until it is gone, much to his disappointment.

"Still awake?" George asks, and warmth presses to Dream's face. He turns into the touch, resting his cheek in George's palm. He feels something between his skin and part of George's hand - something thick. The thought connects to another one, and he realizes that he's been bandaged up around the top half of his head. Though he can breathe through his nose, there is no light that peeks in from below the bandages.

Why is his face bandaged?

Dream allows himself to drift into a more aware state. With more awareness comes more stimuli. He's on a bed. The sheets are soft and the pillow is comfortable. Someone is stroking the back of his hand with a thumb. Someone else is gripping his ankle.

"George." He tries again, and the word happens, this time.

"It's always your name," Someone laughs - Quackity. "You live in his head twenty-four hours a day."

"I'd better, for how much he lives in mine." George mutters, and fingers gentle across Dream's jaw. "Yes, Dream, I'm right here. How are you feeling?"

He doesn't know what to say. Hurt? Tired? Blind? Confused?

"I don't know." He admits.

"That's okay," Sapnap assures him, "You've been out for awhile. How do your eyes feel?"

"I can't see." Dream says, relieved that Sapnap knows there might be a problem.

"They're bandaged. Don't try to open them." George explains and Dream immediately closes the bare crack he'd managed earlier, "We're letting them rest for a few more days before we unwrap them. The doctors treated the wounds from the -" George cuts himself off, "The doctors treated the wounds on your face, so they needed to be covered and your dumb eyes were in the way."

"Oh." Dream sighs in relief, "I thought they were gone."

"Not gone." Sapnap promises, "You just need to rest them. How's your head?"

"Headache." Dream winces, carefully reaching up to touch his head. He feels a hand hovering over his own, as if to stop him, so he doesn't touch much; just presses the tips of his

fingers to the bandages at his temple.

“You have a concussion.” Sarnap tells him. “And a fever. And you weren’t eating properly, so that didn’t help, either. You know we packed more rations than we needed, right? You could have eaten all of it.”

“Don’t start in on him now,” Quackity cuts in, and the touch on his ankle squeezes once, “He’s just woken up. We can make sure he eats properly from now on.”

“I think the fact that he’s gonna be stuck in here for the next few days is punishment enough.” Karl says, and Dream frowns. Something pings as important. Something about Karl.

His heartbeat increases as the thought occurs.

“Karl,” He tries to sit up, panic building, “Are you okay? Are you -”

“I’m fine,” Hands catch his shoulders; too many hands, actually, at least three sets all pushing him back to the bed as Karl talks, “I’m totally fine, big man! Relax, you guys already rescued me. It’s recovery time now.”

“I don’t remember.” Dream says, and then hesitates because that feels like a lie. “I don’t... remember clearly. It’s hazy.”

“That’s because you were concussed, idiot,” George says and Dream knows it is his hand that settles on the side of his neck, cradling his jaw. He lets himself turn into it again, lips pressing to George’s palm. He sighs, the touch feeling much the same way on his skin as the water had felt on his tongue.

“You’re still feverish,” Sarnap tells him. “And you’re going to be drinking so much fucking broth you’re going to hate it. Skeppy is already cooking it.”

“I like broth.” Dream says.

“Good, because I’m going to force-feed you a cauldron’s worth.” George catches his face in his hands and squeezes his cheeks together gently, “For each meal.”

“Okay.” Dream says, lips pressed together like a fish.

“That’ll just make him more sick.” Karl chuckles, and Dream feels someone sit on the edge of the bed, a hand on his knee. “How’s the rest of you feel, dude?”

“Better.” Dream says, lips still pressed together under George’s grip.

“Good enough for some news?” Quackity asks, voice hesitant. “There’s some...some stuff I need to tell you guys. About what happened, back in the Inbetween.”

“About how we got our second chance?” Sarnap asks, his tone serious.

Dream can't see any of them, so he has nothing but vocal cues to go off of. It's stressful; he communicates best when he has body language to work from.

He reaches up, carefully holds George's wrist.

"Help me sit up?" He asks, request muffled by the way George is squeezing his cheeks together. At the very least, he doesn't want to be laying down for whatever Quackity is about to tell them.

"You can lean back on me." George decides, tone magnanimous, and Dream accepts the compromise.

Hands help him sit up and he feels George slide behind him, the two of them shifting carefully until he's leant back in the vee of George's legs, reclining against his chest, head pillowed on his shoulder. Familiar arms wrap around him from behind, their hands intertwined on his belly.

Dream thinks he should maybe be embarrassed. Neither he nor George tend to be overtly affectionate in public, and the royal infirmary - where Dream has a feeling he is - could definitely be considered public. Still, if it's just the five of them, he is happy to be as cuddly as George will allow while he's on the mend. The others have seen far worse than Dream laying against him.

"Comfortable?" George asks against his temple and Dream sighs, letting himself relax against George's hold as he nods.

"All settled, princess?" Sapnap asks once Dream has settled down.

"Yes." Dream says, pleased and uncaring about being teased for it.

"Okay," George says and, when he talks, Dream feels his chest rumble. "Let's all catch up, then. I've spoken to the envoy. We'll remain here until talks have finished, and that will give Dream some time to recover before we leave again."

"Did you tell them about the blue trees?" Karl asks, much to Dream's confusion.

"Blue trees?" He asks and George's fingers flex in his.

"On the way back, we collected a few saplings from those blue tree-like things we saw. You remember them? I thought we might be able to grow them in Kinoko and use them to trade with the Hermits. I promised them a decade of priority trading of the wood we're able to gather from the trees we raise. If we can't manage to get the trees to grow, I told them we'd give them a map to the portal and they could go themselves."

"But -" Quackity starts and then cuts himself off. Dream frowns.

"But what?"

"George destroyed the portal." Sapnap says, voice a whisper.

“Oh.” Dream says. “The arborists better manage the task, then.”

“I have faith.” George declares. “Hope, at least. A...solid good feeling.”

“Oh, good.” Karl snorts, amused. “I’ll keep my fingers crossed, then.”

“Regardless,” George continues, moving on, “We’re here for the next few weeks, at least. Not ideal, but it’ll end with a proper abdication, this time.”

“Which is what you want?” Quackity checks. “No kingship?”

“Fuck this kingship and fuck this kingdom,” George hugs Dream tighter and Dream reverses their hands so he can hold George’s tighter.

“Okay, good, just checking,” Quackity - or someone - pats Dream’s knee as he responds.

“Just wanted to double-check that we were on the same page.”

“I’d leave today, if it were possible. But we’ve still got Patches en-route, and I promised Bad I’d see this last thing out. Give them time to organize a proper abdication. I don’t want them telling people I’m on another Mourning Retreat.”

“Fair.” Karl agrees. “Then we’ll make it work. The doctor said Dream would need at least a week of bed rest before we even let him roam, so a few weeks of being at the castle living the high life until we can bolt isn’t the worst thing I’ve ever imagined.”

“A week is excessive.” Dream frowns, but is immediately shot down by four different voices saying, “*No, it isn’t.*”

“A few weeks is good.” Quackity says into the resulting quiet, though he sounds reluctant.

“Hm,” Sapnap hums, and Dream can imagine the crunch of his brow as he looks at his fiancé. “Is it good, Big Q? That didn’t sound like it was good.”

“I...there’s some stuff I need to tell you guys. Now that Dream’s awake and we’ve all had some rest.”

“Okay,” Karl says and Dream feels the bed shift. He imagines Karl, sitting on the edge, leaning toward Quackity as he talks. “We’re all ears, babe.”

“It’s about when we...died.”

Dream winces. He can’t help it. His grip on George’s hands goes tight and his chest constricts. The memory is still far away. He doesn’t want to try to bring it back. It’s just a haze of agony, a grief that can’t be spoken.

George holds him tighter, turning his head to press his lips to Dream’s cheek in a silent, reassuring kiss.

“Okay.” Karl repeats, a bit strangled. “What about it?”

“A-after,” Quackity stumbles over the word, “You know. After. I woke up and I was with Kristin.”

“You said you made a deal.” George says. Dream vaguely recalls some words that may have pointed to that conversation happening, but he pushes the memories away. He doesn’t want to deal with them right now.

“I did.”

Dream draws in a slow breath. He hears Sarnap’s near-hiss next to him, Karl’s controlled exhale. He feels that George has stopped breathing altogether.

“What did you sacrifice?” Dream is the first to find his voice, worry and unease mounting.

“Nothing.” Quackity says, his tone disbelieving, and he continues hurriedly when Sarnap scoffs, “No, really, we didn’t have to sacrifice anything. Peace, maybe, but I think it was worth it.”

“You’re talking in circles, my love,” Karl practically begs, “Just tell us what happened.”

“Kristin asked if I wanted to make a deal to bring us back, and I said yes. I thought she’d want me to do something for Wilbur, but she didn’t. Well, she kind of did, but it’s more for the End than -”

“Quackity,” Dream interrupts, “Just tell us.”

Quackity tells them.

The silence that follows is heavy with shock. Dream’s mind tries to race, but it’s sluggish and can’t keep up with all the information that’s been presented to him. His headache has only intensified.

“You’re fucking with us.” George says, voice shot. “You’re absolutely fucking with us.”

“I wish I was.” Quackity replies, the grimace obvious even in his tone.

“A dragon?” Karl asks faintly. “We’re...a *dragon*?”

“Just a baby one!” Quackity says like that makes everything better, “From what Kristin said, it seemed like she’ll grow up really slowly so we probably won’t have to worry about her getting, like...huge. And I don’t even know when she’ll hatch fully! It could be weeks! Or months!”

“That’s no time at all.” Dream says, “We’re a month away from home, even if we leave now. We have to dragon-proof our house.”

“Well,” Quackity’s voice goes forcefully light, “I’d rather have to dragon-proof the house than us all be dead.”

Sapnap grumbles, “Not funny, Q. I guess we should be thankful it isn’t, you know, our eternal loyalty and devotion, though.”

“I have a feeling that she thinks this will be more fun,” Quackity sighs “Plus, it’s, like, Wilbur’s immortal soulmate. I don’t know if we’re going to be able to never see him again, as much as I know we’d all like to wash our hands of him.”

George sighs. Dream feels it against his shoulder, and feels the way George tucks his face into Dream’s neck.

“Fucking Wilbur.” Sapnap mutters. “It’s always something with him.”

“I’m sorry.” Quackity says, genuine apology apparent. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

“No.” George clears his throat, having apparently gathered himself. “No, Q. You did amazing. This is an incredible deal. You saved our lives, and we’re going to raise the Guardian of the End! We’re only winning these right now, okay? Wilbur is just a thorn in our sides, but I think we can all say that we’re used to that.”

“And, hey, just think of the novelty of being the only people in history to raise a dragon!” Karl jokes, and then, after a short pause, says, “Can I touch it?”

Dream hadn’t taken a good look at the egg, back in the End. He just remembers that it looks like a rock, vaguely egg-shaped in his mind but he can’t be sure. Knowing what it is, he’s a bit excited to take a closer look at it, too.

“It’s not just mine, you know,” Quackity says, but his voice is a little hesitant, “Just be careful with her, okay?”

“Of course,” Karl says, soft and serious. Dream can’t actually see the exchange, but he hears rustling, hears Karl’s quiet gasp.

“It’s warm.” Karl whispers. “*She’s* warm. I can feel her moving!”

“I don’t know when she’ll hatch.” Quackity says thoughtfully. “I thought it would be immediately. But she gets a little warmer every day.”

“Maybe she needs me to hold her.” George sniffs. “I woke her up, after all.”

“Don’t bring that up.” Dream says quietly, not ready to face or joke about it yet, and he gets a hum of understanding in apology.

“I’ve never seen anything like this shell,” Karl continues, wondrous, “Surely there are no books on the subject of *dragon rearing*. Kristin really didn’t give you any special instructions? No coded messages?”

Quackity hums a negative, “None that I could figure out, at least. I’ve just been... keeping her safe and warm. I have a feeling Kristin will find a way to tell us, if we’re doing it really wrong.”

Dream frowns, trying to think. His brain is beginning to fog as tiredness seeps back into his limbs, his energy waning quickly. “Tommy said something about crows, way, way back on the boat. Maybe she’ll be like a crow.”

“So, treat it like a normal egg?” Sappnap asks, “Dibs not it for sitting on it!”

“No one is sitting on it!” Quackity says emphatically, “It’s not a chicken, for god’s sake!”

“Yeah, I said a *crow*.” Dream stresses, letting his head lull against George’s neck. He knows his voice is fading, but he still can’t help but smile as the others start to bicker.

“Tired?” George asks, lowering his volume so it’s only he and Dream talking.

“Mhm.” Dream admits. “My head hurts.”

“Mine, too, after that bombshell. Sleep, then, idiot. It’ll be time for dinner and medicine soon, so rest up.”

“We’re still discussing.” Dream tries to protest, but he’s fading fast and he knows it.

“*We’re* discussing. You’re sleeping.” George corrects, but it’s gentle. He switches their hands around, curls his smaller ones over Dream’s and interlocks their fingers over Dream’s core. In George’s arms, up against his chest, Dream feels safe and warm.

“Can we talk, later?” He asks, “I wanna say sorry for...for everything.”

“Much, much later.” George allows. “I’ve got things to apologize for, too. But not until you’re better.”

“Okay.” Dream gives in, appeased, and lets himself drift back to unconsciousness as his friends banter overhead.

With Dream sleeping again, and George firm that he won’t be leaving the bed until dinner, the three of them provide George with a good book - full of spice, Karl assures him - and leave the two of them so Dream can get some rest.

They leave with relief turning their shoulders down. The last time Dream had woken up, he’d not recognized any of their voices and he’d barely been able to drink before falling back asleep. Sappnap had almost cried, chin jutting forward to stop himself as he’d helped to soothe Dream back into unconsciousness.

Now, they have proof that Dream is going to be okay. He’s tired, and his voice had been pretty weak for most of the conversation, but he’d *responded* and been aware and participated in conversation. He was going to be okay, even if they might have to break the news about their incoming Guardian a time or two more.

Maybe in response to his happiness, the egg pulses against his hip and Quackity lays a hand atop it through his clothes, over the little lump where the egg manages to make itself known.

“Well,” Karl says, stopping in the hallway and putting his hands to his hips. “We’ve solved Kinoko’s crisis, Dream is on the mend, we’ve got an egg in play, and I’m a totally normal human man again, minus the piss eyes. Do we have any more fires to put out, or do you two think we could sneak away?”

“Depends on where you’d like to sneak away,” Sappnap smiles, tugging Karl closer with a hand on his belt. “And what you wanna do while we’re hiding.”

“I think it’s pretty obvious what I wanna do,” Karl smirks, leaning down to capture Sappnap’s mouth in a kiss that quickly turns heated. Quackity watches, amusement and a not-so-innocent warmth igniting in his belly, as Karl walks Sappnap backwards until he’s got him against the wall, a hand leaning on the stone by his head and the other tilting his face up. Sappnap hums, obviously pleased by the turn of events, and his eyes are almost sparkling when Karl straightens up. As one, they turn to look at Quackity.

“Hi.” Quackity says dumbly, struck by how pretty a picture they make together. Words don’t tend to come easily when he’s distracted by the two of them.

“Hello, angel,” Sappnap laughs and offers a hand. “C’mere.”

Quackity goes. He accepts Sappnap’s hand and gets pulled into their bubble, Karl’s clever fingers finding the curve of his jaw and tilting his face up so familiar lips can find his. He sighs into the kiss, leaning up on the balls of his feet to get closer, a warm chest against his, heart beating against heart, a wandering hand finding a home low on his back.

Another pair of lips touch his neck, wet kisses that have him squirming in Karl’s hold. Their kiss breaks as he giggles, Sappnap’s bristly cheeks tickling him.

“And by obvious,” Karl continues his train of thought, looking down at Quackity fondly, “I mean that I want to commandeer a bath and spoil you two until you’re squeaky clean.”

“So you aren’t interested in ravishing me?” Quackity looks up at him, grinning, and Karl sighs as if in great pain.

“If I spent the rest of my days ravishing you, I’d still say my life was wasted for all the days I did not.” Karl leans down, kisses his lips again, and then the corner of his mouth and then his cheek, up to his temple, and across his brows, speaking between each kiss, “If I...could do nothing...but lay...the two of you...on our bed...and never let you leave...I’d serve you the finest drink...the most delicious food...the highest pleasures...my adoration would anger the gods, for not even at their finest temples would they ever find such devoted a worshiper.”

“You could just have said yes.” Quackity preens.

“A bath sounds really good,” Sappnap decides. “George’s personal bath is big enough.”

“The luxuries of princehood,” Karl smiles, dropping one last kiss on each of them before he steps back to unpin Sappnap from the wall. “Come on, then, before something else goes wrong.”

Sapnap leads the way to George's personal bath, in the same hall as his chambers. The room is a little dusty but Karl throws the windows open to air it out and Sapnap lights all of the lanterns that hang from the ceiling while Quackity tests the taps and finds running water that quickly steams as it begins to fill the tub.

There are still oils and solutions lining the walls, though Quackity can't imagine George even touching most of them outside of maybe a basic soap. Quackity picks out a few that he thinks will help and pours them into the slowly-filling sunken bath. It's easily big enough for the three of them, if not the *five* of them.

There is a scrubbing station in the far corner of the room, which Quackity takes advantage of so that they don't have to change the water out. The showerhead is nice and he stripes down and uses one of the washcloths to roughly clean his skin off. The white is almost entirely a red-brown by the time he feels clean enough to leave the spray for the bath despite the quick scrub he'd given himself yesterday, but he's at least not going to ruin the water.

Karl is already in, leaning against the side of the tub with his head tilted back, submerged up to his neck. Sapnap is still checking the door, making sure the lock is secure, and Quackity leaves him to it, carefully dipping a toe in the water and wincing at the heat. He steps in anyway, sinking under the water with a pleased hiss that has Karl laughing.

"Sap," Karl calls, "It's locked, I promise! Go wash off and join us, please."

"Just making sure," Sapnap gives in, trying the lock one last time before doing as Karl asks. He strips down and leaves his clothes next to Quackity's, only Schlöng being carefully set aside instead of left on the floor with his other things, including his armor.

Quackity can't tear his eyes away, and he knows Karl can't, either. It's been something that has brought them together since the beginning, their shared obsession with Sapnap. They watch his muscles pull and shift under the water, the curve of his spine, the flex of his arms as he scrubs through his hair. The water runs off of him dark, at first, but a washcloth and a heavy hand have it running clear soon enough.

Sapnap joins them, the water rippling as he settles down on the ledge seat. He leans back on his arms, head tilting back. Quackity traces the line of his throat down to where the water starts, swallowing roughly.

Sapnap has new scars, though Quackity is beyond grateful that they're *just* scars, now. The worst is a jagged circle through his chest, just under his collarbone. Quackity remembers the hand; a husk reaching *through* Sapnap's body right in front of him. The shock and disbelief had been so great that Quackity hadn't even felt it, when his own life had been taken.

Now, what had once been a gaping wound is only an inflamed knot of skin. Quackity knows that it will heal, and eventually fade until it matches Sapnap's other scars, a few shades darker than his skin tone.

Before he knows it, he's moved over, settled in close to them both.

"Enjoying the show?" Sapnap asks, a small smile on his face.

“Always.” Quackity says, settling his hand on Sapnap’s chest. Under his palm, he can feel Sapnap’s heartbeat. It’s reassuring, more than he thought it would be. One day, he’s going to have to come to terms with the fact that he watched Sapnap die in front of him. Now, though, he runs his fingers over the red scar, and feels Sapnap’s heartbeat.

“Hey,” Sapnap says, gently, “You okay?”

Quackity blinks, and realizes his eyes are wet. “Yeah, dude,” He says, “Just the heat.”

“The heat, huh?” Karl’s arms slide around his waist, tucking his head onto Quackity’s shoulder, careful of his wings spread flush between them. “Well, it is hot in here...”

“We’re getting clean, Karl,” Quackity puts up a token protest, even as he relaxes in Karl’s grip, “*Clean*. Don’t muddy up George’s fancy bathtub.”

“Dream and George used to use this after manhunts,” Sapnap says, wrinkling his nose, “I don’t think there’s much it hasn’t seen.”

“We’re *in* the bath, don’t tell me that,” Quackity says.

“We’ll distract you then,” Karl kisses the side of his neck, “From that, and from anything else.”

“You don’t miss a trick,” Quackity says, sighing into the embrace. Karl’s hand just barely brushes over the feathers of his wings, and he thoughtlessly extends them, implicit permission in how he bares himself to Karl.

“It’s just a scar,” Sapnap says, softly, “That’s all it will ever be.”

His hand comes to rest against Quackity’s neck, his warm fingers on one side and Karl’s face on the other.

“We’re here.” Karl says, “You saved us, angel.”

“Just repaying a favor,” Quackity says, and it’s meant to be teasing but it’s far too genuine for that.

Sapnap kisses him then, slow and deep, drawing out into an infinity where it’s just them, Sapnap’s lips on his and Karl’s fingers slowly running through the down of his wings. As much as he can feel the roaring in his ears, the press of instincts against his consciousness, he wants to be awake for this. For them. He wants to feel every moment he thought he might never have again, every second he has in their presence.

“Love you,” He says, dizzily, when Sapnap pulls back.

“Love you, too,” Sapnap says, smiling dopily back.

“I love you both but, I hate to say it, we might actually have to get on with cleaning.” Karl says, behind them.

“Do you mean cleaning or *cleaning*?” Sapnap teases.

“Actual cleaning, you dick,” Karl says, “I’m pretty sure you’ve still got half the Nether trapped in your wings, baby.”

“Ugh,” Quackity says, twisting around in the water, coming face to face with Karl, who is watching him with a soft smile. “Stupid wings. I didn’t even have them *out*.”

Karl’s forehead pinches together, all of a sudden, “I noticed. You don’t normally tuck them away like that anymore.”

It’s not a question, not a push into a place he might not be welcome; simply an observation, an open invitation to talk. His mouth still feels dry when he goes to speak. Maybe it’s the humidity.

“I didn’t want them to get in the way.” It’s not a lie. It’s not quite a truth either.

Maybe the truth is that he remembers what it was like, his wings free in the Crimson Forest, how they itched and grated against his skin, how he didn’t want to feel that again. Maybe the truth is that fleeing to what was once safety was the only option with the potential of seeing Schlatt again. Maybe the truth is he didn’t want to distract Sapnap. Quackity doesn’t know.

Maybe the truth is that he doesn’t really know why he hid them again, under his clothes and armor.

But he did, and he’s living with the consequences of aching wings and his partner’s concern.

“Okay,” Karl says, easily. “Can Sapnap preen them? Get the dirt out? My nails are still a bit sharp, I think. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t.” Quackity says, automatically, and at Karl’s unconvinced look, he continues, “Dude, you couldn’t hurt me as a monster. You’re not gonna hurt me now. I trust you.”

Karl looks torn. “I - Another day, Q. It’s not you, I just... I don’t trust myself, yet.”

“Then we’ll trust you enough for all of us,” Sapnap says, decisively, leaning over Quackity’s shoulder to kiss Karl. “Less talking. More cleaning. We still need to set up a bed in the infirmary so we can get a decent night’s sleep.”

“Aye aye, captain.” Karl says, laughing quietly before picking up one of the washcloths, coating it with the scented oils and starting to scrub at his skin. At the same time, Sapnap runs his fingers through Quackity’s wings, and it shuts his brain off for a long moment as he sighs and sinks into the water. He’s so out of it, finally able to relax, that he doesn’t notice when he starts to literally sink under the water.

“Careful, angel,” Sapnap says, forcing his brain back up, “You’ll end up going under.”

“Stop being so good at that, then,” Quackity grumbles, and Karl, off to the side, laughs.

“I can’t reach my back,” Karl says, “Come on, that’ll keep you awake.”

“You just want my hands on you,” Quackity says, even though he takes the washcloth from Karl.

“Are you saying no?” Karl asks, wagging his eyebrows.

“Stop flirting and turn around, Karl.” Quackity says, rolling his eyes.

He’s glad Karl is laughing loud enough that he doesn’t notice how Quackity stiffens the moment that his eyes land on the skin of Karl’s back. He shakes himself out of it, helped by Sapnap running a soothing hand down his back. He sees it, too.

Quackity isn’t stupid; he saw the bones, the *wings*, fall away with none of the pain that their arrival had caused. He also saw Karl sneaking huge chunks of them into the enderchest the next morning, but that’s a whole thing he isn’t going to broach right now. No, he’s far more concerned with the two slashes down his back, the physical evidence that they had been there at all. They’re pale; almost a mirror of the pale skin that had afflicted Karl for so long. The healing pots had meant that it would scar, he knew that. Somehow seeing it here and now makes it all that more real.

He can’t stop himself from running a hand down Karl’s back, his fingers brushing over the raised skin. He feels how Karl stills under his touch. How Sapnap pauses in his motions over his wings.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Karl says, quietly. “Does it look bad?”

“No,” Quackity says, “It’s just a scar.”

“Just a scar,” Sapnap repeats. It’s all silent for a moment, save for the slight drip of water, and the hiss of steam.

“I’ll tell you about it someday,” Karl says, “What it was like. One day.”

“Not today, though,” Quackity says.

“No,” Karl says, relief in his breath. “Not today.”

“That’s alright,” Sapnap says, “We have forever.”

“We do,” Karl says, and his voice is wondrous, “We really do.”

Karl can lie again now. But Quackity knows, deep in his bones, that he’s telling the truth.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

happy ptide month gays gals and nb pals. we didn't plan for this being the posting date, but, here we are, and it's very appropriate.

But first, we have so much incredible art to show you! yall are so so talented and we're so so lucky to have such incredible people in this community!

[this incredible animatic by Nats](#)

[Kristen our beloved by saous!](#)

[Karak's INCREDIBLE wtsd animatic that i cant believe is finally here...](#)

[ghost, as always coming thru with some incredible captain pufffy art!](#)

[Nats again, with Sapnap's flame!!! holy shit!!!](#)

[ghost and her amazin dream art!](#)

[nat is here again](#)

[with painful chap 10 art!](#)

[them setting off into the maze and they look so CUTE!!](#)

[and rest assured that this is what they have been doing in the last chapter...](#)

if you have any art (which, again, is an incredible statement, there is art??? of our fic???) please put it under #scarecrowau on twitter so we can see!!! we love to see anything you make!!

we love you dear readers, and thank you for sticking through us thick and thin. we love you so so much.

For all the hustle and bustle of a working castle, Dream's days pass mostly peacefully.

George is busy, with news of his abdication and the peaceful transition of power from the crown to the council spreading; it brings a host of worried nobles and rich merchants who had previously benefited from the crown and the royal system and who had been waiting for the king's return to get back to business properly. When George isn't dealing with that, he's hashing things out with the council and the Hermit envoy, bringing a long-awaited end to the conflict that had been warring within the courthouse for months. Sapnap stays with him during his duties, bodyguard and advisor both, with Dream confined to the infirmary for the next week.

Dream is only able to stay awake for short periods, especially during the first few days after waking, but there is always someone there to help orient him without the use of his eyes and get him a glass of water. Their full schedules mean that Dream only gets to be with George and Sapnap in the evenings, or in brief respites during the day where George needs to

recharge and chooses to do that in Dream's presence. During the day, it is usually Quackity or Karl that stay with Dream to keep him entertained and guarded. Dream would be annoyed by the confinement, if only he could stay awake long enough to actually get bored.

No, boredom doesn't set in until the second week. George and Sapnap's schedule gets no less busy simply because Dream is able to stay awake properly, and Dream does enjoy Karl's stories and his talks with Quackity, but he quickly grows restless within the walls of the infirmary. Bad and Skeppy make it a point to drop in at least once a day to make sure he's eating and taking his medicine, update him on anything that the others hadn't, and otherwise check in, but they're busy people in Kinoko. The positive of staying awake longer is that he is allowed more visitors, finally, and his days are filled with a few more familiar faces, though he can't see them.

Callahan and Alyssa, Punz and Ponk and Sam all crowd into the infirmary on the third day of his second week of convalescence, and he wishes he could see their faces as they each grip his hand and wish him well. Alyssa alternates between translating for Callahan, his normal means of communication cut off from Dream for the time being, and explaining exactly how the newest recruits are getting on. Ponk is the one that managed to get them all into the infirmary, having started an apprenticeship under the doctors. Punz talks through the restructuring of the knights and their duties, how they're being sent out to do community jobs more often. Some, he hears, have left the knighthood altogether. Niki has opened a bakery. Sam has hung up his armor and is working to improve redstone contraptions out beyond the city.

As much as he is more than content with what he has, he can't deny that he's missed them. He's missed them a lot. He grew up with these people, broke bread, won fights, lost arguments. There was a long time, most of his life, where he thought he would spend the rest of his days with them. He's glad they've found happiness, the same way he has. He's glad that destroying the throne freed more than just himself.

Dream is exhausted, but happy, when they leave after a nurse gives them a particularly harsh word for the third time, promising to visit again soon. He's glad for the distraction that they provide him. It's better than sitting here and worrying about his sight more and more with every passing day. They make good on their word and drop in regularly, sometimes alone or in pairs, sometimes as a group, and Dream appreciates it.

It isn't until the end of the second week that Doctor Beam, who Sapnap had apparently scrounged up from the streets of Kinoko and who has been leading the charge on saving Dream's eyes, allows for his wounds to be unwrapped and his eyes to be tested.

For this, George makes time in his schedule.

Dream sits on the edge of his bed, holding tight to George's hand as the bandages are slowly removed. They're changed twice a day, of course, but Doctor Beam had made it very clear that opening his eyes before they are ready would ruin them, if indeed there was anything left to salvage, and Dream had been too scared to try until he got the go-ahead.

"We'll go slowly. If anything hurts, stop immediately." Doctor Beam says as he finishes with the bandages and then gets started on the cotton pads laid over Dream's wounds. They're

firmly pressed to both eyes and, as they come away, Dream feels naked after two weeks straight of having them.

"It's going to be fine." Sappap says, voice hopeful. "I saw them when you first got hurt, Dream, and your eyes weren't even touched, really. Just a little bit."

"Okay." Dream nods, fingers flexing in George's tight hand. "Okay. Then it'll be fine."

"And if it isn't, I'll fix them." Karl declares. "I might not have been otherwise special enough for the Empress to want me in her Court, but I'm a damn good alchemist. We'll get your sight back. Not that it's gone, but if it *were* gone."

"It's not gone." Quackity agrees. "You're going to see things just as well as usual, when you open your eyes. And, even if you can't, that's okay because we'll match!"

"Optimistic bunch." Doctor Beam huffs, though he sounds amused underneath the grumping. "Okay. Can you sense light through your eyelids?"

"Yes." Dream says carefully, trying to channel George's own calmness.

"That's a good sign. Okay. Let's start with your left eye."

Dream hesitates. "Are you sure? We've waited long enough?"

"Your other wounds are healing nicely. Now's the time." Doctor Beam insists. "Slowly open your left eye."

"Come on," George squeezes his hands, "We're all right here. It's going to be fine."

Dream takes a deep breath and then exhales. It takes a long second, his brain trying to remember how to work the muscle, but his left eyelid flutters. There is a flash of light, kind of stinging and painful after so long, but it gives him the confidence to carefully blink the eye open.

He can see. The world is hazy for a terrifying moment, but he blinks again and he can focus. He can *see*.

Doctor Beam, an older man with freckles and a thin face, smiles.

"Welcome back." He nods, lifting up his hand and spreading out his fingers, "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Five." Dream smiles. "I can see them."

"No darkness around the corners?" Doctor Beam asks and slowly moves his hand to the side, "Keep looking at me. How many fingers?"

"Three." Dream's smile grows into a grin.

"Good, good. Now close that eye and open your right one."

Dream is less nervous now, confidence boosted. He opens his right eye next, and the confidence plummets.

He can see, it's only that the world is - blurry, a bit dim. He blinks a few times, and it does help, but nothing focuses into sharp definition, either.

"Oh no." He says, heart sinking. George immediately tightens his grip and Dream squeezes back, queasy.

"No?" Doctor Beam frowns, holding up his hand again, "How many?"

"Three," Dream breathes in shakily, "It's blurry, though. I c-can see shapes, and colors, and I can tell who everyone is but it's not like my other eye. It's darker."

"Go ahead and open both for me." Doctor Beam scoots closer on his little stool and Dream blinks both eyes open, biting his lip as the world comes into focus. With both open, he can tell that the stronger vision takes over, tries to make up for what his right eye is lacking.

Doctor Beam hums, pulling Dream closer and clicking his tongue as he peers into his eyes. It's intense and Dream stops breathing, terrified that Doctor Beam is going to tell him that his eye is forfeit and they may as well just remove the whole thing.

Instead, Doctor Beam nods and sits back. "It's weak. It's definitely still healing up. You'll need to strengthen it. I'm going to write down a list of exercises for you to do and I'd recommend an eye patch for now."

"To cover it up?" Dream reaches up, hovering his fingers over his bottom lash.

"To cover the stronger one up. Otherwise, the weaker eye won't do the work. Wear the patch for a few more weeks, do these exercises, and I'll bet your vision will come back. It may be a tad weaker than your left eye, but you're lucky to see at all so I don't want any complaints."

"None to be had, sir," Dream tries to catch his breath, the panic slowly settling back down, "S-so you think it's fixable?"

"Fixable enough." Doctor Beam offers. "Sometimes, things are just...different, after something like this. I think you'll be able to use the eye. I can't promise it'll be exactly like it was before."

"Okay." Dream swallows. "Different. But there. I can live with that."

"Good." Doctor Beam pats his knee, "I'd hate to euthanize you over a bum eye, kid."

Dream squeaks a shocked laugh, smiling despite himself.

"Can I see?" George asks, thumb working over Dream's knuckles and Dream turns his head.

The last time Dream saw George, he was dirty and pale, face drawn with upset and fear. He's clean now, and he looks serious, yes, but he also looks healthy and whole. Dream is lost in just tracing his face. Seeing George again feels better than the sunlight hitting his face from

the window. If Dream could just...sit and look for long enough, he's sure the sight would heal his eyes in no time.

"Wow." George's lips part in a quiet sigh, surprised, reaching up to graze Dream's chin, tilt his face down a bit, and Dream blinks, frowning.

"What? What is it?"

"Nothing." George says quickly, turning abruptly away from him and dropping his hand, the tips of his ears going pink. "Look away, Dream."

"Huh?" Dream furrows his brow, leaning closer, "What's wrong? George?"

"Nothing. Your eyes look fine to me."

"Thank you?"

"Prime." Sapnap says in disgust.

"What?" Dream turns to look at him, and then has to take in the sight of him, and Karl and Quackity, too. Everyone looks - happy. Safe, and well-fed, and whole. Relief drags his shoulders down.

"Nothing." Karl says with a secret sort of smile.

"Do you want me to patch your eye up now, or would you rather wait?" Doctor Beam says, drawing Dream's attention again. He's taken Dream's distraction to write a short list of different eye exercises, which he hands to Dream, and Dream folds and tucks the paper into his pocket after scanning it.

"Now, please." He decides. "Might as well get it started."

"You'll have to change it out every few days," Doctor Beam instructs as he sets about folding a fresh bandage to make a patch, "And make sure to take it off a couple hours a day so that the good eye doesn't weaken too much, either. You can stop wearing it when your bad eye isn't as blurry."

Dream takes mental note of the instructions and bends to let Doctor Beam patch his eye. As the bandage loops around his head again, Doctor Beam says, "Your wounds are looking good, too. Keep them clean, don't rip the stitches out, and, for the love of the gods, don't get into another knife fight until they're healed. Vik will be here in the next few days to check on them and take the stitches out."

"I'll try." Dream smiles again as Doctor Beam leans back, the patch in place. "Thank you, Doc."

"Yeah, yeah. Just wait until this place gets my bill." Doctor Beam stands up, offering a hand to Dream. "Just send for me if something goes wrong but, as long as you take care of those scratches, you're almost as good as new."

“That’s good news.” Sapnap says, relieved. “That’s...great news, even.”

“As long as I can still beat you in a manhunt, I’m okay.” Dream jokes, smiling when Sapnap gives him a challenging look.

Quackity sees the doctor out while Dream slowly gets up and walks around the room, trying to get used to the blurry world around him. With his good eye covered, everything is out of focus and off-center. He could function, only the faintest hint of darkness at the edges of his vision, but it would be a challenge to see anything in detail. Reading is out of the question, but so is archery or, honestly, sparring. He wouldn’t be able to make out the subtle shifts and hints of movement that gave people away. He won’t be able to perform his duties at George’s side.

Tommy might even be able to beat him in a spar right now.

George is obviously trying not to hover, but Sapnap seems to have decided he doesn’t care if he’s annoying Dream or not, standing almost too close and following him around nervously. Dream can tell he’s trying to stay on his blind side so Dream won’t notice him.

“Dude!” He finally exclaims, laughing as he catches Sapnap’s wrist so he can’t try to duck out of view again, “I’m okay, Pandas! You don’t have to stalk me.”

“I’m just making sure!” Sapnap defends himself, “It’s a traumatic experience, not being able to see for a few weeks!”

“It’s not.” Dream lies. “I was fine the whole time. You all sat right next to me.”

“Still.” Sapnap mutters, looking down.

“Shut up.” Dream lets go of him and smacks his arm, “Don’t you dare start worrying about me just because I’m not locked up in here.”

“That’s not why I’m worrying about you!” Sapnap protests, but he lets Dream turn him around and push him toward the door without much physical resistance.

“Go.” Dream directs, “George can hide out here for awhile, you guys go and take a walk or something.”

“I think they wanna make out,” Karl stage-whispers.

“They wanna do more than make out,” Quackity stage-whispers back.

“*Out!*” George says loudly and Sapnap’s worried furrow relaxes as he laughs, following his scurrying fiances out of the room with an, “Okay, okay, we get it, Prime!”

Dream shuts and locks the door, and then thunks his head lightly against it, sighing.

The silence settles for only a few seconds before George echoes the sigh.

“You two can’t avoid talking forever.”

“We aren’t avoiding it. We’re just...waiting until we get home. We have stuff we need to work out, I think, and this isn’t the place for it.”

“So long as you talk *eventually*.” George allows and Dream’s shoulders curve in. He and Sapnap - they’re okay. They’re more than okay. But there are some things that he knows they need to talk about, just as George said - stuff that had come up in the maze that can’t be hidden again. Dream knows it. But Kinoko isn’t the place for them; he knows that they need to be home and safe and comfortable before they try to work through those things. He’s okay to wait, and he knows Sapnap is, too. For each other, they can be patient.

He has something else he wants to talk to George about right now, though.

“Are they really bad?” He asks the door, and then bites the inside of his cheek.

“Are what?” George asks and Dream reaches a hand up, not quite touching the scabbing wounds. Doctor Star had been the one to work on his lacerations, according to what he’d been told, and it had been done through a careful application of diluted healing potions to close the deepest parts and then a painful stitching that had apparently torn pained yells from him even in a state of fevered unconsciousness. Dream hasn’t seen them but the tightness around his eyes and when he smiles makes him think that they’re...well. He doesn’t have to wonder about what George had been staring at a bit ago.

“My face.” he sighs, turning around. He glances up at George but he can neither make out his expression nor meet his eye. The floors seem less shiny than he remembers.

“Is your...face bad?” George says, the frown obvious in his voice.

“The wounds, George.” Dream corrects, groaning, “Don’t make me say it, okay? I don’t want to be teased right now.”

“I’m not teasing.” George snaps, “What do you mean, are they bad? Yes, they’re bad, they’re barely even scabbed up right now!”

Dream winces. He can admit that he’s a confident person. His appearance hadn’t been top of his concern list over the last couple weeks, but now that the more serious things have been handled, he’s settling into the knowledge that he’s definitely taken a few hits to his pride. Being forced to go back to the Nether, getting his shit rocked by a gargoyle-esque monster to the point that he was essentially carried through the last half of their journey, banished to bed for the last two weeks with no sight, unable to do his job and protect George during the one time that he’s actually doing his royal duty, and now *this*. The humiliation has not ceased and it weighs on him now, under the newly revealed skin and George’s words.

“Oh, good.” he says carefully. “Good to hear. To have that confirmed, then.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” George replies after a short pause. “Are you worried about the scars?”

“I’m not worried.” Dream lies. “I just...haven’t seen them, yet, is all.”

“No shit.” George scoffs, walking closer. His shoes come into Dream’s view. “You just got your eyes back, you haven’t seen anything yet.”

“Yes, thank you,” Dream mutters with irritation, “Astute as ever, Your Majesty.”

“Don’t call me that.” George reaches out, lightly tapping his chin with one knuckle, “Look at me, Dream.”

“I don’t want to.” Dream says stubbornly.

“You didn’t have any issue staring a minute ago.”

“Neither did you, dick,” Dream complains. “You’re going to look at them again and I’m going to be self-conscious.”

“I wasn’t staring at the wounds, you complete nincompoop.” George laughs, “Oh my god, are you an idiot? A for-real idiot?”

“George!” Dream finally snaps his glare up to George’s face, “Stop making fun of me, I’m trying to be -”

George leans up and kisses him.

Dream goes still, inhaling sharply through his nose in shock. They haven’t kissed since -

The last kiss he’d shared with George was in Kinoko. Just before they’d met back up with the others after leaving the courthouse. He’d caught George’s hand in the shadows of the garden and pulled him close and kissed him. He’d tasted the frustration and annoyance and uncertainty. That had been the last time they’d been alone.

He’d felt George’s lips on his skin in the time since then but not against his own lips. How had he gone so long without kissing him?

George makes a quiet noise and Dream gets the message, wrapping an arm around his waist and pulling him closer. George’s hands settle on his shoulders, though one quickly migrates to cupping the back of his neck, fingers sliding through his hair. It’s a comforting touch, familiar and loved, and Dream aches for it even as he gets it.

Dream’s problems don’t disappear, but he can feel them become *lesser*, less worrisome and less stressful, out of focus with someone so much more important in his arms. George kisses him and Dream is once again forced to re-prioritize everything around this man and staying right here with him.

“I’m sorry.” George says, his touch leaving little trails of electricity where he brushes his fingertips along the skin of Dream’s neck.

Dream hums his question, more interested in holding George and staying in the peace it’s brought him than in talking.

“I’m saying that I’m sorry.” George slides his arm under Dream’s so he can hug him, leaning his head on Dream’s shoulder as he talks, his voice low. “I want to say it first, this time. I’m sorry I was short with you in the Nether. I’m sorry I didn’t take more time to be with you when you were struggling. I’m sorry for always saying the wrong thing before my brain catches up with my mouth.”

Dream frowns, pressing his nose to George’s temple, “You don’t have to apologize. I know I was being an asshole. I was so out of line, I’m surprised you didn’t knock me out before that beast did.”

“It was a close call.” George presses his lips to Dream’s jaw and then pulls back to look up at him, face serious. “I wasn’t staring at your wounds, Dream. I was staring because I missed your dumb face. It’s my favorite face and I’m a king for a few more days, so just let me look at it, okay? I’m allowed.”

Dream flushes, smiling. “My face is your favorite face?”

“Of course it is,” George says with annoyance.

“Of course.” Dream swallows. “Fine. You can stare at it, because I like you.”

“You’re so magnanimous -”

“But *not* because you’re a king. I don’t care if you’re a king.” Dream continues firmly. “You can, because you’re my favorite, too. And I love you.”

“Stop.” George says, and Dream can tell that it’s pure instinct that has the word coming out because George immediately pulls a face. “I mean, I love you, too.”

“I want to apologize, too.” Dream tries to say, but George shushes him, both of his hands coming to cradle Dream’s face. Dream swallows, going silent, as George stares at him with intensity. Dream watches George’s blurry gaze, his thumbs dragging along the line of his jaw, the curve of his lips, the slight tilt of his nose from when he’d broken it as a teenager. A gentle swipe over his forehead and under his eyes, careful of his stitched wounds.

“You know,” George huffs softly, voice distracted. “I’ve always thought you were the most handsome person I’ve ever seen. Even when you were just a lanky squire.”

“Oh.” Dream blinks down at him. George’s thumb settles on his cheek bone, gently swiping along the ridge.

“I’ve been there for almost every scar on your body.” George continues, his other thumb gently running across the scar on the ridge of Dream’s nose. Dream had always had it; he’d been wounded in the landslide that Puffy had found him in and it had healed roughly on the sea. It feels like an entirely new feature on his face as George’s attention focuses on it for just a split second. Dream feels alight under his touch, barely able to breathe. He feels his blood rushing, painting his cheeks and neck and ears with red.

“Lose your eyes.” George says thoughtfully. “Take as many claws to the face as you want. File your teeth into points. Lose all your hair and pluck your brows bare. I couldn’t care less.”

“All of those sound really painful.” Dream whispers, lungs empty.

“I’m still going to look at you and see a beanpole with a sword.” George leans up again, kisses him once, and then twice. “I’m going to see the knight who saved me, over and over. I’m going to see the man who went to hell and broke out just to dance with me again. I’m going to see the man who went back there to help his friend. I’m going to see the love of my life. I’m going to see you.”

“Okay.” Dream says thickly.

“Okay?” George repeats, falling back to flat feet and frowning at him. “Do you actually get it? Usually, you’re so good at reading me when I can’t say what I mean, but if this is something I need to spell out, then I will. You fluster me. I think it’s inappropriate for you to appear in public because of how indecently attractive you are. Sometimes, when I see you, it’s all I can do to not -”

“Okay!” Dream laughs, reaching up to cover his mouth, “Stop. Please, stop. I get it, I swear.”

George licks his palm and Dream jerks it away in shock, mouth dropping open in disgust, “*George!*”

“What?” George grins, teeth flashing, “It was okay to put in your mouth but against your hand is a different story?”

“*George!*” Dream clamps his palm over his mouth again, “Oh my gods!”

He feels George cackling and he finds himself starting to laugh, too, his wounds pulling a bit painfully as his eyes scrunch up.

“I’m just saying,” George drops his voice again, still shaking with the last of his giggles, “They’re bad as in they’re still healing. But if you’re worried about if you’re still cute, they’ve only added to the appeal, Dream. And not *only* because I watched you punching a monster out just before you got them.”

“Is it stupid that I’m worried about still being cute?” Dream can’t help but ask, knowing the answer.

“I think that you’re allowed to be worried about whatever the fuck you want to be worried about.” George says firmly. “And if anyone has shit to say about it, I’ll have them executed.”

“You can’t have anyone executed, George.”

“Why not? I’ve still got an ugly crown. Metaphorically, because I was not putting that monstrosity on my head.”

“Because it’s an abuse of power.” Dream sighs, but it’s fond and adoring and they both hear it.

“Stop me, then.” George dares, smirking, and Dream’s mouth goes dry.

“That’s not, I mean, I - that’s not fair.” He stutters, flushing brighter under the look in George’s eyes.

“Who says? I’ll have them executed, too.”

“You’ll have the whole place beheaded, if you continue like this!”

“Not the whole place.” George corrects, “I’ll keep you around. Someone needs to warm my bed.”

“Oh, I’ve been upgraded?” Dream grins. “I thought you were going to marry some prince or princess.”

“No use, now.” George waves the thought away, “My bloodline ends with me. Looks like you’re skirting in on a technicality.”

“Lucky me.”

“Oh, very.” George tugs him down for another soft kiss, “Makes two of us, I suppose.”

“If you don’t stop flirting with me, I’m going to pass out.” Dream says, only half joking. He clutches at George’s sides, feeling a bit faint.

“Swoon for me.” George teases, “I’ll absolutely let you fall.”

“I know.” Dream complains. “I’d crush you if you tried to catch me.”

“Oh, yeah, bring up your size kink in a serious conversation, that’s so adult of you, Dream -”

“*Size kink!?*” Dream shrieks, jolting back with another laugh, “George, what the fuck!?”

“You think you’re so slick? You think I never noticed?”

“I don’t -” Dream puts a hand to his head, “I’m feeling faint. I need to sleep now.”

“You are *not* pulling the wilting patient card right now.”

“George, I’m serious, I’m about to pass out and hit my head and die at your feet -”

“Do you think that would stop me?” George scoffs. “What, like death is going to come between us? Guess what, idiot, it didn’t. And it won’t, ever. Go ahead and die, I’ll just follow you.”

Dream, giggling so hard that he is genuinely getting dizzy, tries to stop smiling but can’t. His cheeks ache. George pinches them and pulls lightly as he talks and Dream weakly pushes at his arms but, ultimately, can’t stop him.

“You’re an idiot.” He says, and he hears how in love he is but there’s nothing he can do to stop or hide it. He’s never tried to.

“And you want me, so what does that say about you?”

“That I’m a bigger idiot.”

“Exactly.” George nods. “I’m glad that we’ve got this figured, then. Let’s go on a walk, now that you’re allowed to leave this room.”

“Wait,” Dream reaches up to catch his hands, pressing them to his face, “I want to apologize, too.”

“No, thanks.”

“I’m serious.”

“Me, too.” George sighs. “You’re sorry you were a dick in the Nether. Got it. Accepted. I want to walk in the gardens, Dream.”

Dream snorts, raising his eyebrow, only to realize it’s covered by the patch. “Serious moment over?”

“Yes.” George nods quickly. “I’m going to get hives. My heart is beating out of my chest.”

“Okay.” Dream gives in. “I’ll have to say sorry in some other way, then.”

“I like that idea. I think I said something about warming my bed...”

“That can be arranged.” Dream pulls George’s hand to his mouth and presses his lips to his wrist. “I think you also said something about getting some ideas when you see me. Maybe we can revisit that thought.” He can’t *see* it but he *knows* that the words make George’s pupil’s dilate. Dream smiles, nipping at his skin, and George tears his hand away, face going red.

“*Garden.*” He says, voice carefully empty of tone in that way that definitely means that Dream has flustered him.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Dream purrs and absolutely revels in the way George’s breathing hitches.

“Beheading. Drawing and quartering. Burning at the stake.” George starts to list, voice growing louder with each word and Dream quickly turns around to unlock the door, cackling.

George and Sapnap can’t be with him when Doctor Star takes the stitches out of his face, and Karl is busy re-enchanting Nightmare for the second time because *apparently* George tried to break his fucking sword again, so Quackity is the one to sit with him.

“Less gruesome?” He asks hopefully when Doctor Star has left, stitches in hand.

“We match!” Quackity points at his own scar, “Facial scar buddies!”

“I couldn’t pick a better man,” Dream laughs, honestly feeling pretty good about it. He’s spent the last few nights with George, who’s been very enthusiastically proving that he finds Dream just as attractive as usual, and he’s had time by himself to stare into mirrors and take them in. They’re intense, but not horrifically thick, either, and they’re still inflamed and red with scabs but Dream is coming around to the idea that they look more badass, like Q’s scar, than marring, like he’s been imagining. Without the thick lines of twisted black stitching, Dream is better able to incorporate them into his new *self*.

Quackity lets him spend a few minutes in front of the mirror, checking himself out, before he clears his throat to catch his attention.

“What’s up?” Dream asks, frowning “Is something wrong?”

“Not exactly.” Quackity hesitates. “It’s just...I figured I’d tell you, before I told the others. Give you a chance, if you want it.”

“A chance?” Dream raises an eyebrow - the right one, this time, which has taken some getting used to.

“I asked Jimmy to keep an eye out for a...certain ship. It came into the Targay port last night.”

Dream goes still.

“The *Michelle*?”

Quackity nods.

Dream sits down on the infirmary bed, knees weak. “Oh.”

“A small group left late last night. They’ve only got one horse and it sounds like Patches, so I’m betting they’ll be here by mid-afternoon.”

“Yeah.” Dream nods slowly. “That...that sounds right.”

“I thought I’d tell you, first. In case you wanted to meet with them, before George and Sarnap get word and do their whole guard dog thing.”

“They can be a little hardheaded, can’t they?” Dream huffs a laugh, still recovering from the shock. He doesn’t understand why he finds this as surprising as it is. He’d known they were coming, hadn’t he?

No, he realizes. No, he hadn’t. He’d resigned himself to never seeing Puffy, or Patches, again. He hadn’t expected her to actually show up.

“Prime.” He says.

“Yeah.” Quackity leans over and knocks their shoulders together. “So, what’s the plan?”

“The plan?”

“Do I let the others know? Do we send someone to meet them to get Patches? Do you want to talk to her, if she’s part of the group?”

Dream breathes in carefully, thinking.

“I don’t know.”

“Well.” Quackity smiles, “That’s, like, valid and shit, but you don’t have much time to figure it out. You’ve got maybe an hour or two.”

“Don’t tell the others.” Dream decides. “Not yet. I don’t know if I want to see her, but they might make it...”

“Harder, if you do.”

“A little.”

“George is gonna execute you for this.”

“He’s been saying that for a long time,” Dream rolls his eyes, but he can’t help the grin. “Thanks for the heads-up, Quackity. That you knew will be a secret I die with.”

“It had better be.” Quackity points at him firmly. “He might pardon you, but I’m not so lucky.”

Dream laughs, but his mind is still whirring. He says his goodbyes to Quackity, who disappears to go find Karl, obviously still skittish in the castle and looking for any reason to leave for Karl’s library, and then goes for a walk. Even after so long, Dream knows the castle well; though his vision is still difficult to get used to, if he’s slow and careful, then he can make his way relatively easily.

His legs take him to the stables. If he looks just past it, he’ll see the gate that Schlatt apparently brought them into the castle through. He doesn’t remember it, having been both unconscious and an eldritch being at the time.

“I guess that’s that, then.” He says out loud and settles in to wait.

It isn’t a long or an unpleasant one. Within the hour, just as Quackity had predicted, the gate admits a small party of three obviously-seafaring-folk, cutlasses at their hips, and a single horse. With the speckled coat of an Appaloosa and the long, pale mane of a Haflinger, she draws attention.

Her reins are held in a small hand, even Patches’ slightly diminutive stature dwarfing her, is Puffy. She’s wearing her coat and her captain’s hat, her weapons strapped to her belt in a bulky interruption to her profile, her hair up in the Kinoko summer sun.

She’s already talking to a guard.

“I need to speak to the Badlands Ambassador. Tell him it’s Captain Puffy and there’s an emergency.”

“Ma’am -”

“Don’t you dare *ma’am* me, I probably trained your commanding officer! Get me Bad right now, damn it!”

“Puffy!” Dream calls out before she can make the poor guard cry, and he expects to have to do it again, but she whips around so fast that the reins smack at her.

“Dream?” She says, dropping the reins. Patches is, luckily, equally as interested in Dream, and she starts forward without warning, shoving Puffy out of the way as she trots toward him.

“Patches!” Dream can’t help but laugh, jogging from the stables to meet her in the middle. She whinnies and neighs, tossing her head as he grabs her reins and then throws his arms around her neck, “Hi, girl, hi, yes, I’m so sorry we left you behind! I was so worried about you!”

“You’re - you’re here?” Puffy gapes, appearing over Patches’ haunches, “You haven’t gone, yet? Or you’re back? You’re hurt!”

“Uh, yes, no, yes?” Dream hesitates and then smiles awkwardly. “We went. It was and wasn’t a long trip. Long for us, short for...you guys. The Overworld.”

“You must have gotten into quite the scrap.” Puffy reaches toward his face and then snatches her hand back, her tone shifting to something softer. “Sorry, I just -” she takes a sharp breath. “I was worried.”

“About us?” Dream shrugs. “It was rough, but we did fine. All of us came back. This is the worst of it, thankfully,” he motions to his face. He doesn’t want to get into the truth of the matter, especially not with Puffy. Maybe, once day, when they’re all less fucked up about it, they’ll tell Bad and Skeppy the truth, but he thinks even that is a big maybe.

“Yes, all of you, but -” Puffy sighs. “I’m glad you’re okay, Dream. When you didn’t come back...”

“I left a note.” Dream says defensively, “Techno was supposed to give it to you.”

“He did. We left right then.” She reaches into her pocket, pulls out the little note he’d scribbled what feels like a lifetime ago. The ink has run and the words are illegible, though he can’t tell if that’s his eye or the water damage, and it looks worn enough to fall apart any second. She shows it to him.

“Oh. Good.” He says into the silence.

“We would have been here sooner.” She says, carefully closing her fist around the note again, “But we hit some rough waters.”

“You’re here.” Dream turns to look at Patches, leaning his forehead to her cheek. “And you brought Patches home. That’s enough for me. Thank you.”

“Of course.” Puffy lays a hand on Patches’ flank. “She was a brave girl. Fit right in on the high seas.”

“She’s very adaptable.” Dream grins at the praise, giving her neck a firm pat.

“Calm in the face of danger, barely more than a wayward stomp until the whole storm had passed. *Then* she was a riot. Had the whole crewing in stitches. She reminds me of someone.” Puffy says and Dream glances at her, finds her looking at him.

He scrambles for something to say, his mind going blank.

“Payment.” He settles on. “I’ll...I have payment. Let me go get it.”

Puffy deflates, but it only lasts a split-second before she draws herself up again. “No, no. No need. This was on the house. Consider it a gift.”

“Puffy, that’s too much.” Dream frowns, sinking his fingers into Patches’ mane and holding gently, “You fed us for three weeks and took care of Patches for over a month, not to mention all the time you spent getting here.”

“And I’d do it all again.” Puffy says firmly. “I wanted - I...”

She strokes Patches’ back, gathering her thoughts. “Can we talk?”

“I..don’t know if that’s a good idea. Last time we talked...” Dream trails off.

“Last time...I know you needed to say what you said.” Puffy hesitates. “I’ve thought about it a lot. What you said. And there’s some stuff I’d like to say, if you’ll hear it.”

Dream glances over his shoulder. He doesn’t see anyone coming, but he doesn’t doubt that someone has informed George that Puffy has entered the castle. Dream has no faith that Quackity made it all the way out of the castle without giving in and telling Sapnap what he’d been told. Hopefully, George is caught up in official business.

“Okay.” He gives in. “A short one.”

“A short one.” She promises.

Dream looks back at her party and can pick out Foolish even without being able to see very well - he’s a giant golden man who waves emphatically when he notices Dream looking. Dream can’t help the smile, waving back, if less intensely.

“Foolish looks happy to be here.” he comments.

“He likes to explore new places. He’ll have sniffed out all the secrets by the time I get back.” Puffy snorts, sounding amused. Instead of jealousy, Dream just feels a matching amusement.

Regardless of their complicated relationship, Foolish has been nothing but kind to him, and Dream is glad to see him.

“Come on.” Dream turns away from Puffy’s party and leads both she and Patches to the stable. He hands Patches off with a firm order to treat her as if she were King George herself, a full bath and brush down and plenty of food and treats, and a clean stable with fresh hay, and then he leads Puffy into the grounds.

“Do you remember everything?” He asks as he walks, gaze on the ground to watch for obstacles. “I’m taking you to the gardens.”

“I remember.” Puffy smiles. “I was here for a while, after all. I preferred the training grounds, myself.”

“They’re in use,” Dream shrugs, “The knights still train.”

“I heard a rumor in Targay,” Puffy falls into step at his side as they stroll, not questioning their slow pace. “Something about the king abdicating. I thought...”

“George has been king since the night we defeated the throne.” Dream says carefully, well-aware that the walls have ears in this place. “But his...Mourning Retreat has given him a lot to think about and he’s decided that what’s best for Kinoko is if he peacefully transfers power to the council.”

“I see.” Puffy says neutrally.

“He’s staying until negotiations finish up with a visiting envoy.” Dream flashes a quick smile, “And then we’re...we’re gonna go home.”

“That’s...that’s great, Dream.” Puffy says, and she sounds genuinely happy for him. “Do you need a ride back to Pandora?”

“No,” Dream says immediately, and then winces, “Not - not against you or the *Michelle*, it’s just that we’re gonna walk. Take some time to...explore and reconnect, kind of. The Nether...it was the Nether, you know. So we kind of just want it to be us for a minute. Thank you, though. I appreciate it.”

“I remember when I first walked out.” Puffy says by way of agreement. “I think I walked out of that portal and I didn’t stop walking until I hit a beach. Hopped on the first boat that would take me out. I understand wanting to just...leave it behind. Come back to yourself. Karl must be losing it.”

“Yeah.” Dream says, relieved. “He’s handling it pretty well. I can see he’s getting antsy, though. Now that Patches is back, we’ll only have to wait until the envoy is finished. That’ll be any day now.”

“I made it just in time, then.” Puffy sighs. “Good. It would have been weird to just show up at your door.”

Dream laughs, choking it off quickly. “You could have written, if you’d missed us. Bad could have sent it.”

“I’m beginning to think that relying on letters isn’t the best option for us.” Puffy says, her tone joking but her words serious.

Dream shrugs. “I...yeah. Maybe not.”

“Definitely not.” Puffy stops walking, turning to face him properly. In the middle of the gardens now, Dream feels comfortable having a real conversation, so he stops and faces her, too.

“Sit with me?” Puffy asks, motioning toward a bench situated next to a cherry blossom tree. It lies dormant, its season long past, but Dream had often spent afternoons around this tree, one of George’s favorite spots in the garden.

They sit on the bench together, Puffy pulling a leg up to face Dream and Dream facing the tree, letting himself trace the branches with his eyes.

The silence is awkward, but appreciated. They take a few minutes to acclimate to each other and the closeness between them. When Puffy starts to talk, Dream’s had time to prepare himself for however this is going to go.

“When I tell you I had no idea about you and Sapnap being...sacrifices, I mean it, Dream.” Puffy begins, cutting straight to the chase. Dream only barely withholds a flinch as she continues. “I knew that George’s family got their power from the Nether. I could sense that the throne had ties to it, but that’s it. Prince Lawrence was from Targay and sometimes attended the animal market for imported horses and that’s how we met. I just...I got a summons from the queen while I was in port, asking to speak to me about a permanent job, promising that you’d be given a respectable position, too. Bad and I knew each other from previous business, too, and he told me he’d been offered a similar position for his son, so I took it. I thought it would be good for you, give you a chance at stability. You’re...you were right. You never took to the sea like I did. You were always meant to be on land. I didn’t want to admit that, but I could see it, so I said yes, and tried this place out.”

“Do you know why he reached out to you?” Dream asks, carefully testing the seams of his cloak. Sapnap had apparently spent a night scrubbing it in water kept hot through his own force of will, until all of the blood had been soaked out; there had been enough that Karl’s charm had broken, which Karl hadn’t been pleased about.

“I can’t be sure. I saved his life, once. They needed someone to lead their guard. He knew I was good, and different from what most knighthoods had. Maybe he knew I had you. I’m a believer in fate, though, and I believe fate brought me here, and you, too.”

“Fate.” Dream repeats, thinking of all the books in Kristin’s library. Fate had brought him to this castle, just as fate had brought him through the gate, got him lost in this garden, led to him seeing George for the first time, to him finding Sapnap scrubbing laundry with tears on his cheeks.

“Fate.” Puffy sighs. “But, if you believe nothing else I say today, believe this. If I’d known that they wanted you as some sort of sacrifice, then I would have snapped you right back onto my boat and we never would have come back. And I would have taken Sapnap and George, too, though I don’t doubt that Bad and Skeppy would have been right there with me. Fate be damned.”

Dream huffs, thinking about a world where that had happened. “It would have started a war. Maybe with the Badlands, even.”

“I trained their knights.” Puffy snorts. “War? I’d have fought the castle and won! I’d be a queen now, if I’d had the desire. Maybe you would have been the prince in your little love story.”

Dream laughs, imagination once again shifting into a new branch. “Wow. Queen Puffy. It fits.”

“Ah, hindsight.” She sighs, leaning back on her hands and tilting her head back. Her hair falls over her shoulder, the dark and light strands mixing in their cascade, cinched at the nape of her neck.

“...I believe you.” Dream says as the silence settles down into something kinder.

“Thank you.” Puffy says without looking at him. He can hear it in her voice, though, and doesn’t need to see her face. George had said that Dream had always been good at reading between his lines, but it’s only because he’d been doing it with Puffy for so long before. Practice makes perfect.

They let the quiet settle again. Dream knows that they don’t have much longer, but he can’t bring himself to break it. It’s the first time they’ve been alone together, properly, in years and years and years. He still feels conflicted and complicated and not all good about her, but he can admit that this...this is nice. He likes this, whatever it is.

“Ah!” She suddenly cries out and flops over onto the ground, making him jump.

“Puffy!”

“I’m too old for this shit, kid!” She yells, rolling onto her back on the ground and stretching her arms and legs out into a starfish. She doesn’t sound angry, just - frustrated, and amused about her own frustration.

Dream hesitates and then settles back onto the bench, watching her as she glares up at the sky in thought.

“I really thought you were safer here.” She finally settles on saying. “What the fuck. You were the prince’s knight, in the damn capital city in the damn castle right down the way from the queen of the whole damn place! How is that not the safest place for a kid to be!?”

“I don’t know.” Dream says, trying not to smile. He remembers this Puffy. Huffy and annoyed and loud about it. It reminds him of how Sapnap used to be. He’d imitate her

tantrums all the time when they were young and it had only grown more dramatic as he'd gotten older. Dream had thought they were so immature, before, but he hasn't seen a proper one in so long and he actually misses them.

She rolls her head to glare at him. "I'm sorry, kid. I really fucked this all up, didn't I? Even though I was trying *not* to."

"You did." Dream admits, though it's scary to do.

"And if you're actually saying that I hurt you, then I *really* must have." Puffy sighs. "You would apologize for falling when the deck shifted, you know? Stumbling all over the boat, apologizing to the railings."

"I -" Dream flushes. "That isn't true."

"It is." Puffy shakes her head against the ground, "It was so cute, and so confusing. You were the cutest, most confusing thing to ever happen to me, Dream. This tiny little kid, and then you just shot up like a weed, stumbling all over the place and apologizing for it and trying to befriend all the fish. You made me regret my deal."

"*What?*"

"Yeah." Puffy sighs. "Yeah, duckling. I don't know if it was Kinoko that drove me to the sea again. I can't be sure. I never thought of Kinoko as my home."

"Don't say that." Dream turns his gaze from her, his throat tightening up with the sharp, sudden hurt.

"Sorry." She smacks herself in the face, palm to her forehead. "Rephrase. *You* were my home, Dream. My deal was to give that up. Be on the run, never keep roots in one place. But I had you, and you...my heart was so full. Your first lost tooth. The first time you shot an arrow. The first time you beat someone in a spar. I was so proud of you. I *am* so proud of you. I was keeping to the word of my deal, but not the spirit. *You* were my roots."

"You said you didn't have any regrets. Back in Pandora." Dream mutters, pulling his cloak tighter around himself.

"I say all sorts of stuff." Puffy lets her hand flop back over. "I'm a pirate, Dream. I don't think we know how to be...open. Vulnerable like that."

"How am I supposed to believe what you're saying now, then?" Dream leans on his knees, frowning down at her. "You could be lying again."

"I could be." Puffy admits. Dream wishes he could see her face clearly, but it's just a blur under the shade of the branches and his recovering vision. All he can really see is the gold of her eyes as she looks right at him. "There's no way for me to prove to you that I'm not lying when I tell you that I never, ever thought of you as a burden, Dream. But it's the truth. I love you. I loved being with you, for the time I was able to be. I'm sorry I failed you this badly. I was young, and so fucking stupid, and scared, and I thought Bad and Skeppy were the best

parents in the world and I was just some scraped-together sea dog play-acting at raising a kid meant for so, so much more than I could ever give him.”

“...it wasn’t fair for you to decide that on your own.” Dream shifts his eyes back to the tree. “It was...it was awful. It was *awful*, thinking I’d chased you away. That I’d failed you. To realize you didn’t want me. That you didn’t miss me, that you regretted taking me in -”

“I missed you.” Puffy cuts in. “I swear I sent you letters. I sent you a lot of letters, at first, and then...I thought it might be easier for you, if I was *less*. If I just let you build your life here, with your prince and your knighthood, and people that would be able to do right by you in ways I couldn’t. I wasn’t meant to be a mom, Dream, but I don’t regret the years that I got to be. You were the only thing that ever kept me from the sea, and I would have stayed, if I could have.”

Dream doesn’t answer. He doesn’t have the words to. If she’d said any of this to him when he was a kid, maybe he would have. That was when he needed them most; when he’d been fourteen and woken up to a letter that told him the only parental figure he’d ever known had run away and left him behind; when he’d been sixteen and Skeppy was holding him as he raged and lashed out against him and Bad to push them away so they couldn’t hurt him like she had; at nineteen, when he’d almost drowned throwing out and then trying to take back her letters from the same sea that had let her sail away without him.

He’s an adult now. The hurt has solidified and shaped him. He’s known more of his life without her than he has *with* her. He isn’t sure if he’ll be able to let the pain go, stop holding it against her. He doesn’t know how to incorporate the things she’s saying into the way he understands the world, and her, and their relationship.

He doesn’t know.

“I don’t know what to do with this.” He admits, not really sure what else to say. “What do you *want*?”

Puffy sits up slowly, her hair a frazzled mess, her hat askew. She fixes it carefully, obviously thinking. Dream waits, hating how eager he is to hear her answer just so he can use it as a base for what to do next.

“All I want is for you to know that you were not a burden, Dream. Never. You were a gift. A gift that I never, ever regretted being given.”

Dream squeezes his eye closed. He covers it with a palm, trying to process.

“Thank you.” He settles on.

“Thank *you*.” Puffy repeats back at him. A hand settles on his knee, gentle and cautious. He lets it stay. “You don’t owe me your time, duckling, or your forgiveness. I’m not going to ask you for more of the first or any of the second. I just...I just wanted to tell you that. Answer some of the questions you had.”

He nods, not looking up.

“That’s all. How about you lead me back to the stable and take some time with your horse, hm?” Puffy squeezes his knee and then uses it to pull herself off the ground with a groan of both her voice and some of her bones. “Prime, I’m getting too old for that, too.”

“I could have told you that.” Dream says hoarsely, going for a joking tone and only half-reaching it. Puffy laughs, regardless, and slaps his knee lightly before letting go.

“Hey! I could still take you on in a fight, kid, don’t get too full of yourself.”

Dream stands up from the bench, rubbing his eye roughly and forcing a grin on to his face.

“You haven’t seen me fight in a long time. I’m really good.”

“I have so! You did kick plenty of pirate ass. Maybe I *should* be careful...Psych! As if I’d admit defeat already!”

Dream laughs, starting to lead Puffy out of the gardens as they bicker lightly, neither of them letting the conversation drift to anything deeper than arguing about who is a better fighter.

It’s nice, and congenial, and exactly what Dream needs after that conversation. A way for him to just...let it rest and process while he goes through the world around him with Puffy at his side once again. They take their time; Puffy stops to admire a rosebush and Dream doesn’t complain, spotting a particularly bloomed flower and carefully picking it off as she prods at the lush leaves.

They’ve done this hundreds of times before, from back when he was young. Walked the gardens, bickering and debating countless things that were, ultimately, pointless in all ways except those of fun. It’s...it’s nice. He doesn’t know how to feel about it, otherwise, but it’s nice.

George is at the stables, looking particularly purple in the face, when they emerge from the gardens and round the corner. Sappnap is close by, brushing Patches out himself, though he doesn’t look any happier than George.

When George spots them, Dream sees him go still, though he can’t make out his expression.

“Oh, dear,” Puffy sighs. “Time to face the executioner, I imagine.”

“Nobody is safe,” Dream goes along with the tease, smiling. George is cute when he’s annoyed, at least.

“Captain.” George says tightly as they approach. “You brought Patches. My thanks. I’ll have payment brought to you.”

“Your Majesty,” Puffy says, bowing almost comically low. Dream clears his throat to hide a laugh and George cuts him a dark look that he senses more than sees.

When Puffy straightens up, she’s smiling. “No need. Sir Dream has already provided me with payment.”

“Has he?” George says neutrally.

“She’s my horse.” Dream shrugs. “It’s only right.”

“Hm.” George hums, voice fraught.

“I’ll take my leave, then.” Puffy looks between them, her voice softening as she looks at Dream. “It was...it was good to see you, Dream. Truly.”

“Yeah.” Dream nods, meaning it when he says, “You, too. Will you be heading back to Targay?”

“We’ve got business in town.” Puffy hooks a thumb toward the city of Kinoko, “We’ll finish that up. Might stick around for the abdication ceremony, if that sits right with His Majesty,” her eyes cut to George, who has broken out both the crown and his most cutting stare.

“It does.” George grits out when Dream raises his brow.

“I’ll be around, until you leave.” Puffy smiles. “If you...I dunno. Have any questions you want me to try to answer. If you want to yell at me more. Whatever you need.”

“I don’t need to yell at you.” Dream flushes. “I shouldn’t have, before.”

“You should have.” Puffy corrects lightly. “I deserved it. You get too used to being an all-knowing captain. Sometimes you need your kid to humble you.”

George makes a high-pitched humming noise. Dream thinks he’s going to break with how hard he’s biting back whatever he wants to say.

Dream bites his lip against his smile, trying to be serious.

“Okay. Enjoy town. Thanks for bringing Patches back, she’s...she’s important to me.”

“I know.” Puffy reaches for him again and then obviously thinks better of it and folds her hands in front of her. “Goodbye, Dream. George.” She raises her voice, “Sapnap.”

“Bye.” Sapnap says without looking at her.

George doesn’t say anything.

Puffy laughs. “At least I got *this* right, huh? You’ve got two very good friends.”

“The best.” Dream agrees, letting the smile take over his face.

She gives him one last, long look, tracing his face. He looks back, trying to cement what she looks like to memory, trying to clarify the blurry image he sees into something sharp to be remembered; the gray at the roots of her hair, the new wrinkles, the life lines and sun spots on her skin and her horns. The way her eyes still flicker with laughter, even in a moment where they’re sad, too.

She pats her chest, lays her hand over her heart as she looks at him and shakes her head. And then she turns around and Dream watches as she walks back to her party. Foolish waves her down, laughing and immediately talking a mile a minute, and she joins in without hesitation, waving off whatever he's saying.

"Are you okay?" George asks stiffly and Dream looks away from them after sending Foolish one last wave.

"I'm okay." He says. He's not really sure if it's true, he's not sure about how he's feeling at all, if he believes a word she said or if he's content to think her a complete liar. But it feels right to say.

"You're sure?" Sapnap joins them, frowning up at him. He reaches towards Dream's face and Dream goes still to let him do whatever he's doing. Sapnap ends up thumbing under Dream's eye, catching a wayward tear.

"Yeah." Dream catches Sapnap's wrist and reaches for George's. "I'm good for now. I'm processing. I'll...I'll tell you about it later. Maybe tonight."

"Okay." Sapnap agrees easily, surprised as he lets Dream squeeze his wrist for a moment before releasing him. "You're gonna tell us about it?"

"Yeah." Dream says. "It'll help me process."

"I can have her -" George starts but Dream is already shaking his head, laughing.

"No, George. No fucking executions!"

"Just one."

"No."

George scoffs, crossing his arms, but he's starting to loosen up now that Puffy's gone and Dream's obviously not too destroyed after a conversation with her. Dream tugs the rose from his back pocket, presenting it to George with a smile.

"What's this?"

"It's a rose, idiot."

"I *know* what it is," George rolls his eyes, but he carefully accepts the flower, brings it to his nose to smell and smiles into the petals. Dream wonders what the deep red looks like to George, if the rose in his eyes is as pretty as it is in Dream's. He hopes so.

"Not to change the subject," Sapnap cuts in nervously, "But, since I have you both here, there's something I wanted to...ask you about."

Dream lets his laughter trail off, focusing in on Sapnap. He's close enough that Dream can make out both his face and what's on it. He's nervous, but his grin is still in place, eyes squinting from how wide it is.

“Hopefully it’s something that will lower my fucking blood pressure,” George mutters.
“What’s up, Sap?”

Much to Dream’s amusement, it’s absolutely *not* something that will lower George’s blood pressure.

It takes another week before the envoy and the council reach an agreement on all possible outcomes regarding the blue wood.

Sapnap feels like he knows entirely too much about this fucking trade deal. He doesn’t *care* about this trade deal and would happily wash his hands clean of the whole thing, but obviously *something* has crawled up George’s ass about it because he’s bound and determined to see it through to the end.

When they aren’t sitting in on council meetings, they’re with Bad and a small planning committee discussing the details of the abdication ceremony.

“So, I sign the paper, and it’s done. But then I have to make a speech about good will and peaceful transfers of power. Even though I’m not king.” George says at one point, equal parts annoyed and confused.

“Yes.” Bad says, “To help prove that we don’t have Dream in the wings at sword point.”

“I see.” George says, but Sapnap can tell that he definitely does not see. Either way, they sit through those committees, too, and most of them are Bad and the rest of the room making decisions while George nods and Sapnap tries not to fall asleep.

It’s been a long time since Sapnap had to follow around George as a silent shadow and glare menacingly at all times; he’s never had to do it *alone*, either. But Dream’s eye is still weak, and he’s also still recovering despite how interested he is in pushing himself, so Sapnap doesn’t complain about it. Instead, the two of them take turns making up interesting stories to tell the other three when they meet up for dinner.

Sapnap rarely has time to see Karl or Quackity during the day, much to his frustration. Karl isn’t even at the castle until evening, spending most of his time at his library, enchanting Nightmare and brewing potions. He smells so strongly of magic every night that Sapnap can smell it even when he isn’t around. Quackity alternates, spending part of his day with Dream and part of it with Karl, occasionally appearing to check in with Sapnap and whisper to George about the this-or-thats he’d picked up on during his day.

The five of them barely get dinner together most nights before he and George and Karl all collapse in exhaustion, if Dream even makes it that late at all. And, between all of this, Sapnap is *trying* to *plan*.

“A going-away party sounds fun,” Karl says over dinner when Sapnap brings up the idea with him, “We could have it at the library! I’m going to pack up the last of my books to send home ahead of us, so it’ll be empty!”

“That’d be perfect,” Quackity says thoughtfully, “Dream and I can decorate it the day before.”

“We can invite our friends.” Dream yawns, nodding in agreement, “Have everyone in one place for once. Karl, can your guild make it?”

“Most of them? I think Tareq is out of town. I’ll see if he can stop in!”

“Can we invite the knights?” Sapnap asks aloud and George shrugs.

“Invite whoever you want. It’s your party, isn’t it?”

“We should invite Bad and Skeppy, too,” Dream mumbles, eyelid drooping heavily as he leans against George at the table.

“Okay, okay, I’ll write up a list of people.” Sapnap promises, “George, take him to bed before he drowns in his soup.”

Between the council, and the ceremony, and trying to hunt everyone down to personally tell them to be prepared for a small get-together as soon as the envoy is taken care of, and also barely getting to see any of his other friends or even speak to the one he’s with constantly, Sapnap is miserable, and he knows that George is right there with him.

But the day comes, finally, when Tina, the friendly council woman who’s been leading negotiations, submits a document with all appropriate signatures to George, who signs the page with a flourish.

George hands the document to Bad and then stands, clasping his hands loudly.

“Well, gentle council members and our guests from Boatem, I do believe that concludes our business. I want to thank each of you for your hard work and dedication to the continued growth of the relationship between our two governments.”

“And we’d like to thank you,” Mumbo says politely, though he looks pleased enough to Sapnap. “Coming out of seclusion to perform this duty was admirable, King George. If you’re amenable, we’d like to stay for your abdication ceremony. We can speak for the peaceful nature of your monarchy’s absolvment.”

“Of course.” George nods. “There is no force acting on me except my own.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” Scar smirks at him, somehow both knowing and mischievous, and Sapnap feels his skin heat. He’s not fond of the envoy, but he makes himself behave. They just have a night or two left. They’ll make it.

George dismisses the council and Sapnap waits until it’s just the three of them, he and George and Bad, before he relaxes.

“Tonight?” He asks George, almost begging.

“Tomorrow night.” Bad frowns, “Give us some time to work, Pandas! Skep is going to get a team together to decorate and I need time to cook! It’ll be the party of a lifetime, I promise!”

“It doesn’t have to be big,” Sapnap says awkwardly, “Just, you know...nice.”

“Don’t worry.” Bad assures him, coming to stand in front of them both. He sets a hand on each of their shoulders and Sapnap sees the tears coming before Bad’s eyes even start to water.

“Dad,” Sapnap starts, but Bad just snuffles and shakes his head.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m just so proud of you,” Bad clears his throat loudly. “I never thought I’d see that crown on your head, George. You’ve handled yourself so well. And Sapnap...the man you’ve become...” he trails off, sniffing again, and Sapnap tries to stop the blush, groaning as he shoves at Bad’s arm.

“*Stoop*,” He complains, but George just laughs, the fucker.

“Then the abdication ceremony will be the day after the party.” George catches Sapnap in his arm, locking his head between his forearm and bicep as he talks and Sapnap lets him with an eyeroll.

“We can make that work.” Bad agrees. “You two just take tomorrow to relax. Go find some nice outfits in town.”

“Nothing fancy! You promised!”

“I said *nice*, Sap! Nice! *You* said nice!”

“I’m worried our definition of nice is different.”

“Stop micromanaging.” George scolds him, “Whatever Skeppy puts up is what it’s gonna be. Come on, let’s go hunt the others down and find something to wear to the shindig.”

“Why can’t we just wear our regular clothes?” Sapnap grumbles, but he lets George pull him away from his father and toward the door.

“I’m not answering that, because it’s a stupid question.” George says over his shoulder, and Sapnap gives in with a roll of his eyes.

“Have fun, boys! Let’s have dinner tonight!”

“Sounds good!” George answers for them, and then they’re leaving the courthouse and on their way to collect Dream and Quackity from wherever they’ve sequestered themselves so they can make their way to Karl.

They bicker as they walk, once Sapnap escapes George’s undignified hold, but Sapnap is distracted. He’s thinking about tomorrow night. Nerves dance in his belly, but they have wings, too; butterflies.

“Maybe a going-away dinner isn’t the best idea.” He says out loud, though he doesn’t mean to.

“It’s a good idea.” George says firmly. “It’s going to be the last time we’re all in one place in a really long time. Why wouldn’t we meet up and have some time together? Even Puffy’s here, as much as I wish she wasn’t.”

Sapnap is not going to touch the Puffy-shaped sore right now. That’s a battle that he’s happy to let Dream fight since George is much more liable to tear his head off than Dream’s if he says the wrong word on the subject. Instead, he hums.

“I’m just...I don’t want to overwhelm them. Especially Karl. He’s been through enough lately.”

“I think he’ll love it.” George shrugs. “People, food, wine, a party, his library, you two - what else could he possibly need to make it the perfect night?”

“That’s a good point.” Sapnap admits, scanning their surroundings as they talk amongst themselves. He’s both looking for threats and looking for their missing duo, who he knows tend to enjoy wandering the gardens together around this time, if they don’t have anything else planned. It’s just past mid-afternoon, and Sapnap has come around to the idea of getting some nice clothes for the party enough that he’s looking forward to going shopping with them all, so the faster they’re located, the faster they can leave the castle for what might, hopefully, be one of the last times.

“I only make good points.” George says snottily. Sapnap’s brain conjures up an image of the old nobleman he’d stolen that tone from and he cackles, shoving George’s arm and catching him before he flails over and lands in a royal pile on the stone path they’re wandering, which sets off a new round of banter as they search.

Sapnap tries to let his worries go, but the butterflies stay.

“I don’t think we should ever allow you to pick your own clothes again,” Quackity says, eyes roaming over Karl’s dinner outfit.

“You wound me,” Karl says, pressing a hand to the contrastingly patterned waistcoat, a soft orange in its swirls, while the formal jacket he wears is in hues of dark purple.

“*You* wound *me*,” Sapnap says, from behind them both, “I think my eyes are going to melt.”

“Rude,” Karl says, turning around and stopping midturn as he lays his eyes on Sapnap.
“...Wow.”

“Yeah,” Quackity says, swallowing audibly, “Wow.”

“Oh man,” Sapnap says, straightening the outfit that he might once have worn to George’s coronation, “Do I really look that bad?”

“You look incredible and you know it,” Karl says, batting his arm, “Holy shit, how did we not know you clean up nice?”

“There wasn’t much of an occasion for it,” Sapnap shrugs, “I’ll be sure to dress up for absolutely no reason once we get home.”

“I look forward to that,” Karl says, eyes sparkling, “In fact, I can barely wait...”

“Not that that isn’t incredibly tempting,” Quackity says, “But we do, in fact, have to go to dinner.”

“Do we, though?” Karl asks, pursing his lips.

Sapnap swallows down the butterflies in his stomach, and hides the nervous shaking in his hands by taking Karl’s carefully in his own.

“We really really do,” He says, and then kisses Karl’s palm, “But I’ll make it up to you later, alright?”

Karl groans, but Sapnap knows this is an easy acquiescence.

“Fine.” Karl holds out his own hand, and Quackity takes it as easily as breathing. He’s doing a wonderful job at hiding his own nerves, though Sapnap is sure he’s just as anxious about this as Sapnap is.

But with Karl’s hand in theirs, he knows he can take on the world.

By every measure, the party is already in full swing by the time they arrive at the library. The knights, in their typical way, are already deep into the provided mead; Punz, his arms around Purpled and Callahan, wailing a drinking song like a caterwauling cat. Alyssa has always been able to drink like a pro, so the only way to see she’s incredibly drunk is because of the slight pink tinge to her cheeks. Sam and Ponk seem to be trying to get Foolish, of all people, to engage in a drinking game. Puffy sits beside him, nursing a drink, and Niki is smiling and flirting with her without any shame.

Bad and Skeppy greet him at the door, and Sapnap can tell that Karl is feeling something is afoot when Bad hugs them all while barely holding back tears. But then his guild is there, all of them, people he hasn’t seen in years and that’s all swept away in hugs and hellos and manly backslaps. There are even a couple of Quackity’s old friends; Connor, who looks like he could have just walked in off the street, sporting a bemused smile, but who is apparently someone who works in the castle kitchens, and Charlie, a slime hybrid who just seems happy to be here that met Quackity last week and has grown attached. Quackity greets them both with huge smiles, and Sapnap counts that for a win.

Many comments are made on Karl’s outfit. It makes Quackity laugh every time Karl splutters with indignation, and Sapnap is happy to skip the small talk and just watch them shine.

He could watch them forever. He loves them so much.

And he has to do this before he loses all his nerve.

Catching his eye from the end of the room, George gives him a grin. He's dressed formally too, and for the only time since his parent's have died, he's wearing a circlet on his head. It's sign that he's someone who can do this for them. At George's side, Dream gives him a thumbs up.

The knowledge that they're here, behind him and with him and supporting him, gets him to turn to Karl.

"Hey, um." He says, eloquently, "Karl?"

In a moment, the room goes quiet. He can hear Bad shushing people, but he's also pretty sure that most of the people he loves are just naturally nosy.

Quackity squeezes his hand tight.

"Yes, love?" Karl says, half a smile on his face, seemingly not noticing the fact that the whole room is quiet while he's looking at Sapnap.

"Can we get married?" Sapnap says, all in a rush.

Karl's face softens, "I popped the question several months ago, Sapnap, you're already my fiance."

"No, I mean," Sapnap says, his mouth completely dry, "Marry me. Us. Let's get married, right now."

Karl stares at him, confusion slowly fading into his face as he processes the words.

"Right now?" He repeats. "But we're -"

"In your library." Quackity cuts in, sounding pleased with himself, "With good food and every person in Kinoko that we care about already here."

"George and Dream haven't..." Karl trails off, looking between Sapnap and Quackity with wide eyes, "They aren't...?"

"I talked about it with them. A lot." Sapnap glances at them again and both of his friends give him rapid motions to continue, which helps bolster him. "I'm sorry it took me so long to figure it out. Thank you both for being patient with me while I got caught up again. I want to get married, Karl, and I want to marry both of you now." He hesitates and then adds, "If that's okay with you two."

"I want to." Quackity says immediately. "Whenever. Whatever. I'll sign a paper or do a ceremony, just as long as I get to call you both mine at the end."

"We don't need a wedding for that." Karl scoffs, but his voice trembles. "We're already yours, Q. And you're ours."

“I know.” Quackity leans up to kiss Karl, one gentle peck. “So, what do you think? Want to get hitched?”

“Yes.” Karl nods, and then doesn’t stop nodding as he looks around wildly, first at Quackity and Sapnap, and then Dream and George, and then the rest of the room. “Yes, I want to get married! Right now! Someone find us a contract and an officiant and -”

“Karl.” George laughs, “Why do you think I have my crown right now? *I’m* the officiant.”

“And I have the contract.” Dream says, holding up a simple document that he’d snuck down much earlier in the day for this exact reveal.

“You planned this!?” Karl whirls around to look at Sapnap and Quackity again, and Sapnap freezes like a deer as Quackity laughs.

“Yes, Karl, we planned this.”

“I’m going to swoon.” Karl says and Sapnap knows he isn’t kidding because Karl likes to keep him on his toes. He lurches forward just in time to catch Karl and get pulled into an excited series of kisses as Karl laughs. “You’re the most - romantic people - I’ve ever known and - I want to - get married - *right now!*”

Sapnap, so fucking relieved he could cry, just lets Karl kiss him until he’s ready to be stood back up. “Are you sure?” He checks, “Both of you? I understand if you want something... bigger.”

“I don’t care about bigger.” Karl waves the words away, “I just want you both. I don’t care. Now is the perfect moment.”

“Any bigger than this and I’ll start to get stage fright.” Quackity jokes, tugging gently on Sapnap’s shirt. “Let’s do this before I actually do get stage fright.”

“Are we *actually* doing this thing any time soon?” George calls, drawing their attention to him. He stands facing their overloaded table of guests, enough space for the three of them to stand before him and be witnessed.

“Yes.” Karl says without hesitation and drags them both to their spots.

Dream lays out the document after carefully clearing a small patch of table with Skeppy’s enthusiastic help and produces a feathered pen - *Karl’s* feathered pen, Sapnap recognizes.

Karl is the first to sign his name, letters careful but casual. Quackity is next, just under Karl’s. Sapnap is last.

He looks at Dream, pinpricks of worry making themselves known, but Dream just grins at him and Sapnap feels the worry dissipate. He signs his name under theirs and turns to face George.

The three of them link hands and George looks them over briefly, and then out at the table.

“Does anyone object to this union?” He asks and Sapnap doesn’t bother looking at their gathered friends, sure that Dream and George will put a stop to any good-natured buffoonery before it grows out of hand. Instead, he keeps his eyes on his fiances, his soon to be *husbands*. Excitement fills his belly. His emotions are matched by what he sees on their faces, neither one - for once - trying to hide how they’re feeling.

“Then we’ll proceed.” George says, when the appropriate time of mostly-quiet has passed. “Sapnap, we’ll start with you. If you have vows, now is the time to recite them.”

Standing in front of everyone that Sapnap has ever cared about, facing both Karl and Quackity, Sapnap thought he’d be more nervous. He’s been thinking about this exact moment, almost non-stop, since they walked out of the Court of the Inbetween. About how much he had regretted not just...marrying them, having a moment like this with them before they’d almost died. *Had* died. He’d died. And he’d died without this.

Sapnap doesn’t want to make that mistake again. He doesn’t want to let any more time pass, and George had been right. The people they care about are in this room, and all of them have gathered for them, and Sapnap wants to make this promise in front of all of them.

He’s not nervous to do this. He’s nervous because he’d spent so long worrying about if Karl would say yes that he forgot to write fucking vows.

“Sap,” Dream whispers, nudging his foot, “Say something.”

“Sorry.” Sapnap flushes, “I just - there’s a lot to say.”

“We’re listening.” Karl says, still starry-eyed.

“You can just do the official vow.” Quackity squeezes his hand, “It doesn’t have to be anything wild.”

Sapnap nods, clearing his throat. He thinks about following Quackity’s suggestion, but Karl is looking at him so warmly, and Quackity is smiling, and he wants this to be perfect for both of them. He wants the words to be right, to capture everything he can never say, when Karl flirts with him or Quackity teases him. He wants, for once, to give them the words back.

“When we first met,” he says carefully, “I wasn’t a whole person. I was in pieces. My entire life was scattered in ashes around me and I was barely holding on to myself.”

He has to take a second with the words, swallow past the lump trying to form in his throat. His eyes cut to Dream and to George, both watching him closely. Having them right here helps him to continue, a reminder that that time is over - because of the two men in front of him. If not for them, he would have taken George to Snowchester and they would have lived out their days in misery, missing their third. And Dream would have been stuck, too, in a completely - and much worse, perhaps - way.

“Meeting you, Quackity, was definitely an experience. I’ve not been that blown away since, that’s for fucking sure.” He jokes, and Quackity laughs, blinking rapidly as his eyes start to shine.

“And Karl,” Sapnap snorts. “I’d never seen anyone in something so fucking ugly as your cloak.”

“Hey!”

“It’s true.” Sapnap doubles down, heart pounding. “That shit is horrendous, dude. But it’s grown on me, like you both did. I wanted to die back then. I had one reason to keep going, and even that felt like it was slipping through my fingers. You two saved us. You saved me, and then you did it again, and then again, and then *again*. Every day, you two save me. You guys fight my dragons when I’m not strong enough to do it. You’re my happy ending.”

Karl’s lip wobbles and he bites it viciously, his nose turning red as he sniffles.

“Sir Sapnap, First Knight of Kinoko Kingdom, you are promising to uphold the bond that you create with your partners tonight. To support them and respect them for the rest of your lives together. You make this promise in front of your king and your friends and family. Do you swear?” George asks him, and he’s trying to use his Prince Voice, but he is smiling and Sapnap is grinning because he can’t stop himself as he looks at the loves of his life and nods as George talks, too eager to wait.

“I promise.” Sapnap says the moment George stops talking, and he means it with every piece of himself.

“Who’s next?” George looks at Karl and Quackity. Karl makes a high noise in the back of his throat and nods at Quackity emphatically.

Quackity, giggling nervously in uncontrollable bursts, says, “Fuck. Um. Fuck.”

“The vows?” Sapnap offers once Quackity has managed to stamp his laughter down.

“I can do it.” Quackity says with a deep breath, sobering up, “Okay. Okay, keep it together.”

It takes him a second, but he exhales and nods.

“You two already know what you did for my life. What all four of you did.” Quackity cuts his eyes to Dream and George for a split second before returning them to Sapnap and then Karl. “You both caught me. There’s...there’s nothing else I can say, except that you caught me.”

His wings shift as he speaks, feathers slowly ruffling as his nerves take over. Sapnap resists the urge to sooth them, well aware that they are in a room of what feels like fifty people all silently watching except for the occasional weep from Bad and Skeppy.

“Quackity, Advisor to the Crown of Kinoko Kingdom, you are promising to uphold the bond that you create with your partners tonight. To support them and respect them for the rest of your lives together. You make this promise in front of your king and your friends and family. Do you swear?” George repeats, at least managing to keep the smile out of his voice, if not off his face, this time.

“I promise. I promise, I promise,” Quackity repeats, lifting onto his toes in his excitement, wings shifting and shuddering as he forces himself back down to the flats of his feet.

"Karl?" George looks at Karl, who's only grown more inconsolable through Quackity's vows.

Karl just sobs.

Sapnap laughs, unable to resist letting go of his hand to reach up to wipe at his tears. Karl is romantic and dramatic, but Sapnap is fully aware that he isn't the most emotional of the three of them by far. A display like this warms Sapnap to his core.

"Just nod when George says the thing, okay? It counts."

Karl shakes his head rapidly, trying to speak again.

"I can - I can do it, damn it," Karl curses, roughly scrubbing his face. "I've had these vows written for two years!"

"Over-prepared, as always," Quackity teases, reaching up to brush away stray tears that both Karl and Sapnap had missed. "We're listening, darling."

"N-not the *pet name*," Karl practically howls, throwing himself into Sapnap to hide his face in his shoulder as he clutches Quackity closer.

"Do the words, Gogy," Sapnap laughs goodnaturedly, unbearably fond. He can hear other people laughing, but none of it feels mean. The feeling of the room is just...unbridled joy.

"Karl Jacobs, Royal Alchemist of Kinoko Kingdom, you are promising to uphold the bond that you create with your partners tonight. To support them and respect them for the rest of your lives together. You make this promise in front of your king and your friends and family. Do you swear?"

Karl nods rapidly against Sapnap's shoulder, curls bouncing and nearly smothering him until he reaches up to hold them in place.

"I swear," Karl warbles, muffled in the nice material of the fancy shirt Sapnap wears.

"The crown recognizes your union and blesses it. Under the authority of King George I, you are wed." George intones with all of the ceremony required of an officiant. Dream holds the document up with a book underneath and George uses the feathered pen to sign it, too, officiating their marriage petition. George ruins the solemnity of the act by then saying, "Now kiss, you giant babies."

Sapnap laughs, exchanging a look with Quackity before he uses the hand he has holding Karl's curls to tilt Karl's face.

"Let me kiss you, idiot." He whispers loud enough for Karl to hear and Karl, still weeping, turns his head to kiss him.

It's wet and desperate and Karl doesn't just kiss him once. It's at least three times, and then Karl is reeling Quackity in to kiss him, too. Quackity looks dazed, his smile wide when Karl straightens back out.

"N-now you." Karl demands, guiding them together with feeble hands and Sapnap is more than happy to listen. He leans down, presses his lips to Quackity's, though they're both smiling too wide to really do anything more than knock teeth.

Their friends cheer, a roar that surely breaks past the walls of the library and spills into the streets outside.

"My *baby* is *married*!" Skeppy shouts, sounding about as hysterical as Karl.

Sapnap feels hands on his shoulders. Dream ducks down and says, "Turn and look at everyone. You're now Sir Sapnap, Lord Karl, and Lord Quackity."

"Lord?" Quackity blinks. "That's real?"

"A real title." George confirms. "And that's two for each of you. Or did you not notice your addresses?"

"I thought those were -" Quackity blinks, his own eyes getting misty. "Oh."

"An advisor and a royal alchemist...I did pretty good for myself." Sapnap says smugly, letting Dream turn him to face their friends and family.

"I'm going to give you my vows," Karl manages to grit out, "As soon as I stop fucking crying, I'm going to!"

"We'll listen." Quackity takes both their hands, still smiling wide enough that his cheeks puff out. "But, for now, let's go party. We just got married!"

Dream pushes Sapnap forward and Sapnap stumbles, bringing Quackity and Karl with him, and they're welcomed back to the table with loud applause from his parents and pounding of wood by the knights and the Beast guild.

"Congratulations are in order!" Jimmy stands up, lifting his flagon high, "Our librarian's just been hitched!"

"And he was totally calm and chill when it happened!" Chandler raises his, too, obviously having set aside his feud with Karl for the night.

"Huzzah!" Chris shouts and slams his flagon into theirs, spraying the table with beer.

"I fucking hate you guys," Karl whines, finally calmed enough to speak.

"Time to get them drunk!" Sam shouts, and another roar goes up. Sapnap sees even Bad lift his glass.

Sapnap's heart feels overflowing. Like his inner flame couldn't get any bigger without burning him from the inside out.

He glances behind him and finds Dream and George leaning against each other, watching him. Even with his eye patched, Sapnap can read the pride on Dream's face. George just

looks - content. Sapnap is grateful - beyond grateful - that George let this be his one voluntary act as king. It means more to Sapnap than he really has words for, that George, the oldest of them, had blessed their union in so intimate a way.

George motions for him to turn around, go back to the celebration, and Sapnap can't help but laugh, his throat tight. When he turns around, Bad and Skeppy are gazing at him as if they've never seen him before and they're amazed. He smiles at them and Skeppy grins back, excitedly waving as if they aren't only three feet away.

Quackity squeezes his hand tight enough to hurt and Sapnap squeezes back. He looks at them both, immediately caught up in them, as he often is.

I love you. He mouths to Karl, and laughs when it makes Karl start to tear up again.

It's nice. It's perfect. Sapnap doesn't know how long the peace will last, but he's going to hang on tight to it and put up one hell of a fight when it eventually tries to go.

Quackity goes to sleep that night feeling very, very good. Karl's vows had been whispered against his skin for hours and Sapnap's hands had followed each word as they'd enjoyed their wedding night.

He'd hoped to be allowed to sleep in. Perhaps a nice brunch before the abdication ceremony began. A calm first morning as a married man.

Instead, the moon is still high and the sky is still pitch black when the quiet squeak of the door opening wakes him from a dead sleep.

His blood runs cold, his heart starts to pound. Is their peace over so soon? Has someone come for the egg?

He hears Sapnap shift, muscles coiling where he's pressed against Quackity, obviously awake, too. They're bare under the sheets. If this is an assassin, or someone sent for the egg, Sapnap will be fighting nude.

Schlong rests against their bed, Sapnap no less a warrior for it being their marital bed, and Quackity sees his hand creeping under the blanket for it.

"Calm down, idiots, it's me." George says, and a lantern is lit. Sapnap snaps up, sheet pooling around his waist and exposing Quackity. Quackity doesn't bother fighting to cover up, groaning as he shifts across Sapnap's lap to burrow, instead, against Karl for warmth. Karl hasn't moved even a bit, still breathing deep and slow in sleep despite the noise and movement. Damn him and his easy rest.

"Why the fuck are you here?" Sapnap demands, sounding more annoyed than angry. "We could have been - doing stuff!"

"Firstly, ew." George scoffs, "Secondly, what the hell do you mean, why are we here? We're leaving?"

"Leaving?" Quackity mumbles roughly, sleep still coating his tongue.

"Yes, leaving." George comes around the bed to close the curtains and Quackity finally gets a glimpse at him. He's wearing simple clothes again, completely unlike the fine garments he's been parading around in for the last few weeks. His cloak is already on, sky blue like the one he'd been wearing when they first met.

"Why?" Quackity buries his face in Karl's curls, his husband finally beginning to stir, "You have to give a speech."

"They'll have more luck killing me than making me talk in front of the entire city." George snorts. "Dream's getting Patches and a wagon hitched up now. Hurry up."

"Isn't this what happened last time? And they made you a whole king?" Quackity frowns, tilting his face up to glare at him.

"I've already signed the documents, *Quackity*," George says, purposefully saying his name with a pointed tone, "I've spent three weeks making sure everyone is aware that I don't wanna be king. A speech won't change anyone's mind about my willingness. Now come *on*, before we get *caught*."

Sapnap flops back onto the mattress with a louder growl.

"I hate this fucking family." He says, and then rolls out of bed, "Shut your fucking eyes, at least!"

"I've seen it all before," George rolls his eyes but Quackity sees him turn around and cover them with his hands.

"Our fucking wedding night is going to be us on the run again," Quackity sighs as he sits up, Sapnap shimmying into underwear and then hopping around as he yanks his pants on, too.

"If it was *you* about to have to talk to the whole damn kingdom, I wouldn't be hearing all this bitching." George complains, huffy.

"George?" Karl turns slowly, voice sleepy, "What?"

"Yes, George is here." Quackity confirms, petting through Karl's curls to help him wake up.

"Wow." Karl blinks his eyes open, lids still heavy with slumber. "I haven't had one of these dreams in like a year."

Quackity raises an eyebrow. "This isn't a dream."

"Hm?" Karl frowns. "That makes more sense, if Dream isn't here, too."

"*What?*" Sapnap pauses, arms through his shirt but head still invisible, "Karl, is there something you want to tell us?"

"Not if this isn't a dream, I don't." Karl says, more awake this time. "Why is George here, now?"

Quackity snorts, equal parts amused and scandalized, though he knows he probably shouldn't be.

"His stage fright is chasing us out of the country."

"Oh." Karl blinks again and then smiles up at Quackity. "Hello, angel."

"It's much too late for that, Karl." Quackity chuckles, but leans down to drop a kiss to his lips. "You're not getting out of a future conversation about certain dreams with any sweet talking."

"I'll gladly have any conversation with you, my love." Karl hums, the rumble coming from his chest.

George makes a noise, another whine as he says, "Do gross married stuff in the wagon, guys!"

"You're interrupting *our* wedding night," Sapnap snaps right back, straightening his shirt out and gathering clothes off the floor to hand over to Quackity and Karl, "So you have to listen to us being gross."

"I could have you all executed," George subsides, arms crossing, though his back stays to them.

"Not anymore, you can't," Karl laughs, accepting his pants from Sapnap with a light kiss, "You are officially no longer king. Your Ex-Majesty."

"And thank Prime for that." George starts for the door, "You have thirty seconds before I fling the door open."

"George!"

Under threat of exposure, Quackity and Karl quickly climb out of bed and dress. Karl is still buttoning up his shirt and swinging his cloak on as George shuffles them out of the room. Quackity had left the egg on the bedside table in the little carrier he'd fashioned for it and he hastily ties the carrier around his neck and tucks it under his shirt, against the warmth of his skin, before they're ushered downstairs. They'd spent the night - or however long they'd had before George had interrupted - in Karl's bedroom above the library and the remains of their wedding is still in place as they make their way to the front door.

The night is crisp, autumn slowly settling in.

"Where's Dream?" Sapnap asks, pulling Quackity against his chest to keep him warm. Quackity, body still waking up, is unfairly freezing and he presses against Sapnap's heat as he glances around for their fifth friend.

“He had to go to the stables while I came here.” George pulls his cloak around himself for warmth, peering down the way toward the castle. He’s practically hopping, rocking up on his toes and then back down nervously. Now that Quackity isn’t being actively yanked out of his warm bed in the middle of the night, he can admit that he’s sympathetic to George’s plight. That speech is long and Quackity has heard enough people talking about going that he has a feeling the crowd will be big for a historic event like the ending of a monarchy.

Quackity is still pissed though. He’s going to get his revenge, eventually.

Karl sways on his feet, leaning against Sapnap’s back with his arms loose around his waist, tucking his face into his neck and quickly falling into a precarious cat-nap. Quackity thinks about attempting the same thing, but knows he’s more liable to end up falling on his face than getting any rest.

Quackity lets his fingers thread with Sapnap’s, their rings clinking together with Sapnap still wearing his on his off hand. He smiles, the now-familiar feeling a gentle reminder that these aren’t his fiances, anymore. They’re his *husbands*. Finally. Quackity has a ring, and two men who love him and have promised to spend their lives with him, and two dear friends, and a... being...child? Of some sort, at least, on the way, and a home waiting for him. He has a life that he’s built with them, for each other and for himself, and for his future.

That thought helps him come to terms with his toes feeling as if they’re about to fall off.

Finally, an eternity later, the quiet street begins to echo with the sound of an oncoming horse. Quickly following the hooves is the sound of wheels over stone. Patches comes around the corner with Dream close behind on the bench of a small wagon.

Unfortunately, he is not alone. Bad and Skeppy sit to either side of him, arms crossed as they both glare at the four of them gathered. Sitting in the wagon is Puffy, who looks more awake than all of them combined, grinning so wide that it may as well be *her* wedding night.

“*Boys.*” Skeppy says the moment that they’re within earshot enough that he doesn’t have to yell and wake up the entire street. “A *second time*? Did you really think we’d fall for the same trick?”

“We’d hoped.” George mutters mutinously, sending a poisonous glare to Dream, who sits between Bad and Skeppy with an apologetic pout.

“Well, it certainly did *not*. We caught you red-handed this time.” Skeppy hops down. “Without a goodbye, even!?”

“You’re trying to make me give a *speech*!”

“*I’m* not doing anything, that is all Bad’s doing. You could have said goodbye to *me*, at least!”

“Skeppy!” Bad complains, “We’re on the same side here!”

“My side is whichever side is going to get me a goodbye! What if we’d missed them and we didn’t get to talk to Sapnap about *the thing*?”

“The thing?” Sapnap frowns, straightening and knocking Karl askew enough that he wakes up with a soft *huh* and looks around wildly in confusion.

“Yes, the *thing*.” Skeppy repeats. “Your father and I had something we needed to discuss with you! We were going to do it tomorrow so we didn’t impede on your wedding, but *obviously* being *thoughtful* is a *mistake*!”

“Hey, leaving tonight is as big of a surprise for me as it is for you!” Sapnap defends himself, “I was just sleeping and then George comes in and wakes us all up in a dizzy and -”

“*Sapnap*, where is the solidarity? What the fuck, you’re still loyal to me, crown or not!” George demands, and Sapnap scoffs loudly.

“Oh, no, I’m not getting in trouble for this! This was your idea, so -”

“Enough,” Bad claps and Quackity snaps his eyes back to him. Bad’s smiling, the annoyance replaced with fondness. George and Sapnap both subside, still grumbling and glaring at each other.

“Regardless, we caught you. Skep and I need to talk to Sapnap and then...well. If we close our eyes for a minute because the moon is oh-so bright tonight...and something or someones happen to disappear...”

Bad trails off and Quackity finds himself smiling, biting his lip against it.

“What thing are you talking about?” Sapnap asks, sounding worried, and Quackity reluctantly steps away from him, pulling Karl along, so Sapnap can be taken to the side by his parents.

“Just come here, kiddo,” Skeppy waves until Sapnap goes to him, and then the three go far enough that their soft voices don’t carry.

“What about you?” George asks, bringing Quackity’s attention to the wagon and - Puffy.

Quackity hasn’t seen her since the stronghold island; he’d been informed of her arrival so he’d gone to Dream, and then to Sapnap because he’d thought better about leaving Dream alone with someone who tended to cause him emotional turmoil, but he’d not actually seen her. She looks exactly as she had the last time they were face-to-face, perhaps a bit less wind-blown.

“I crashed at their place,” Puffy knocks a thumb toward Bad and Skeppy, now bent low in a circle with Sapnap as they talk, “Woke up when they did to stalk the stables to see if you’d try to ditch.”

“How fortuitous.” George says, very obviously not meaning it.

Puffy laughs, shrugging. "I just wanted to say my last goodbyes. I know you don't care, George, and that's okay, but I wanna tell you I'm proud of you. I worried, when you were a kid, you know. You were so withdrawn and puny."

"Thanks." George grits.

"*But*," Puffy continues, sliding over the edge of the wagon to find her feet on the cobblestone. "You've grown up well. You're true to yourself and willing to fight for what you want. I know you'll keep them safe."

Quackity glances between George and Puffy and Dream, who seems to also be looking between them, too. Dream has kept him and Karl mostly separate from this drama, and Quackity appreciates it, as much as he wants to be there for Dream in this. It stings, still, sometimes, when he thinks about his family, though he rarely does. He doesn't blame Dream for being cautious with Puffy - Quackity would have pushed her over the railings just as quickly as George would have if it had come down to it - but it's also obvious that Dream has settled into feeling some kind of way, because he doesn't look nervous as he watches them interact. Thoughtful, maybe.

"Thank you." George says, tone only a tiny bit less hostile. "I'm going to."

Puffy lets the conversation die there, instead turning her eyes on Karl.

Karl stares back. Quackity has settled into the golden eyes in the last weeks. Now that he sees Puffy's again, he wonders if it's just a Stray thing. A marker that they're the ones that got away.

"You made it, kid." Puffy settles her hands on her hips. "I'll be honest, I was doubting you. I should have known better."

"You should have." Karl sniffs. "I've got a very talented retinue."

Quackity bites back a smile, leaning into Karl's side. "And a big brain."

"That's not the only big thing I've got," Karl smirks and Puffy chokes on a surprised cackle, covering her mouth to muffle it in the quiet night scene.

"Well," Puffy scoffs, laughter still plain in her voice, "I'm glad. I don't see many other strays in the world. I hope that whatever deal you made is worth it."

Karl holds Quackity's hand. "It is."

She nods, eyes sliding to Quackity. She winks and Quackity flushes, for some reason, and smiles against his will. Damn. He wants to dislike her, and he does, but it's hard to remember, sometimes, that he does. She's likable, funny and friendly. She's made terrible mistakes and she's hurt people that Quackity loves. She sailed them across an ocean and then returned Patches to them without a single complaint. Never once did she offer to go with them to the Nether.

She's a complicated person. Quackity, also a complicated person, can understand that.

Sapnap returns to them a moment later, looking dazed and a little pained but smiling wide enough to hurt.

“Is everything okay?” Dream asks, his first real words since he trundled up on the wagon carrying all of his parents.

“Fine.” Skeppy says, smiling to match Sapnap. Bad hovers between them both, looking both happy and concerned. “I’m sure Sapnap will tell you later.”

“Secrets, secrets,” Puffy taps her nose, “They always find a way out, in the end.”

“Yeah, usually because someone blabs,” Skeppy smacks Sapnap’s back. Sapnap stumbles forward, into George, who catches him with a roll of his eyes.

Bad sighs, looking their group over. Quackity hasn’t had much chance to speak to him during the last weeks, only short conversations and the occasional dinner with everyone. He hopes that when they get home, they can invite Bad and Skeppy to stay for awhile again.

“I suppose this is it.” Bad says. “You’re sure I can’t convince you to stay for your speech, George? Not make three weeks of planning worthless?”

“Nope.” George smiles, “My mind is set.”

“I understand.” Bad clasps George’s shoulder. “You were a good king, George. Your mother would have been proud.”

George doesn’t have anything to say to that. He nods, meekly, schooling his features into something to hide his reaction to the words.

“And you two,” Bad looks at Karl and Quackity, crossing the distance in only a second to sweep them up in a tight hug at once, “I can’t tell you how happy I am. How proud I am. Sapnap struck gold, twice.”

Quackity laughs, hugging Bad back. He can’t say how much Bad’s words mean to him, the small bits of emptiness in him where his family is missing that they fill.

“Thank you for everything, Bad.” Karl says quietly. “Kinoko is in good hands.”

“Sweet-talker.” Bad laughs, releasing them after one last squeeze and stepping back. “Take care of each other, and these three.”

They both nod and Quackity watches Bad go to Dream, still sitting on the wagon.

“Dream.” Bad sighs, fond and exasperated in one.

“That’s me.” Dream smiles, eye crinkling. He’s still wearing his patch, and Quackity knows that he will be for a long time. It took him...he doesn’t even know how long to accept it, when he lost vision. He knows Dream needs time with it. He hopes the patch works, even a little.

“Take care of yourself.” Bad reaches out and ruffles Dream’s hair, his touch so obviously careful of his wounds. “Let them help. You’re doing amazing, kiddo.”

“*Baaaaad*,” Dream complains, shoulders rising, but he doesn’t push Bad’s hand away and Bad stops after a moment, stepping back.

“Okay, okay. Leave before I change my mind.” Bad says and turns his back on them, voice getting weepy. “I hate goodbyes!”

“I’m not saying goodbye.” Skeppy says stubbornly, arms crossing. “I’m literally going to come visit you the second you’re settled back at home, with or without my workaholic husband.”

“Skeppy!”

“Come visit.” Sapnap says over his father, “Stay for awhile. You know that you’re always welcome wherever our home is.”

Skeppy scoffs, and then throws himself bodily into Sapnap’s arms for a strong, diamond-encrusted hug.

“The second you walk through the door, I expect a letter!” Skeppy shouts, “The second you cross the property line, even!”

“Okay, Skep,” Sapnap laughs, hugging his dad tight until Skeppy shoves away from him and turns his back on them, too.

Quackity and Karl make their way to the wagon and Sapnap helps them both climb into the back before joining them. Dream offers George a hand and he takes it, settling into the bench with him. Patches, who’s been quiet for the entire meeting, sways with interest, ready to go as much as they are.

“Safe journeys.” Puffy says from the sideline. She sweeps her eyes over them, and settles on Dream. They shine, wet, in the moonlight.

“Safe seas.” Dream says back, clutching the reins tighter. “Bad knows our address. If you...if you want to write, maybe.”

“Is that okay?” Puffy blinks at him, shock evident.

“I might read them. If they reach me.”

“I’ll write.”

“You don’t have to.” Dream starts to backtrack, but Puffy smiles, eyes nearly disappearing with the force of it.

“I’ll write, Dream. I promise.”

”...okay.” Dream allows. “I’ll read them. Bye, Puff.”

“Goodbye, duckling.”

Dream flicks the reins and the wagon sets off. Quackity settles into Sapnap’s side, Karl’s hand still tight in his, and watches the three of them slowly grow smaller as the wagon pulls away from Karl’s library. When they’re out of sight, Sapnap curls into Quackity’s side and hides his face in his shoulder, shoulders shaking. Quackity strokes Sapnap’s hair, letting him have his moment. His eyes burn but he blinks a few times until they stop. He doesn’t want to cry again. It’s a good night. A great night, even.

“Ready to go home?” he asks, voice small in the open air.

“*So* ready.” Karl says with feeling.

With the sun rising behind them, they leave Kinoko.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Before you hear from me, aka, Bramble/Mari/MJ, its Hannah!

Hello hello!!!! We are here!!!! The epilogue!!!!!! Ahh it feels fake that we have finally reached the end of home. We started this what feels like years ago now for how long it took to post it compared to sunlight! 13 weeks is so many weeks!! Thank you to everyone who has been with us since sunlight and to everyone who found us during home and to everyone who will read this fic or both fics after they're completed :) this has been such an adventure and one I've loved being a part of. Thank u to the discord for constantly being so amazing and supportive of us and each other, and to jess for reading every word of this story first to help us make it the best it could be!!! We wouldnt have the scarecrow au of today without all of u guys, especially jess.

And maybe most importantly for me, thank u to mari. U have been the best co writer, pushing me to try new things while being willing to back down when I'm being stubborn, giving me leave to explore my own issues thru the characters and putting up with my final read thrus and edits and picky word changes LOL. Thank u for writing with me and building this world with me, i kno a few ppl have said that it means a lot to them but idk that it could mean more to anyone than me and I have u to thank for that!!! I look forward to writing coda 2 with u as soon as I can organize my life properly!!!

Sorry for the long authors note but it's only a short chapter and we have so many thanks to get through! First, a little housekeeping - Hannah has mentioned coda 2, and yes, we are writing it! No, i have no idea when it'll be out - _ - We'll get there! There are also maybe a couple of little oneshots that will be popping up in the 'scarecrow' series rather than in this fic directly - alternate pov's, not!fics, so make sure you are subscribed to the series to see those!!

Hannah has already thanked both our wonderful discord (which you can find here: <https://discord.gg/xZEQH5xUcK>) and our wonderful beta Jess, without whom this fic would never have been as good as it is. You guys will never know how much Jess works to make sure our writing is the abosloute best it can be, and you should give her all the love <3

Second, to Hannah, who has already been so lovely to me but I can never really express how much it means to me that we actually did this, and out of all the people you could write with, I was the one you picked. It is incredible to see what we've done, its been an absolute pleasure writing with you this last year (ITS BEEN A YEAR???) and I can't wait to do it all over again with something new one day! Thank you for putting up with me writing out of order, my continued love of my beloved skrunkle s!wilbur, and me wanting to kill the entire main cast. You trusted me when i proposed things that were outside your comfort zone and that means more than I can ever say. You pushed me to make my writing so much better to try and reach your level, and keep pushing me to

think outside the box with my writing every day. I love you, I'm so glad I met you and I'm so glad you let me come along on this crazy ride!

Next, to someone who probably won't even see it, but my partner, who doesn't even watch dsmp and has had to put up with me talking about s!wilbur to her multiple times, and bore it with good grace. I love her so much and she has had such a large impact on this fic that she doesn't even know, and I love her so much. Sorry for abandoning eurovision with u to watch quackity lore <3

Finally, to all of you! Our readers! Our commenters! Our artists! People we never expected and without this fic would just be our little passion project in the corner of the internet. You guys have made it so much bigger than we ever expected. Please please check out the artists linked in the end notes (I ran out of space lol) because they deserve all your love just as much, if not more than us! We love you, and so, dear readers, for one final time (until the coda posts)... Lets see our boys.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Karl can't sleep.

He tosses and turns, tiredness dragging at his eyelids but never fully pulling him under. He rests on Sapnap's chest to feel his heart, but all his fingers can find is the knot of scar tissue. He tries to take Quackity's hand, but the familiar pulse under his fingers makes him jumpy.

In the end, he calls it a loss and slips out of bed to make himself a cup of tea. Karl pauses for a moment, lingering in the doorway, watching his...his *husbands* - as they shuffle together in sleep, breathing deep and slow.

He's still restless. No matter how much he watches them sleep, he's still restless. He wants to wake them, wants to hear their voices and feel their hands on him, reassuring and comforting and *alive*.

Quackity's nightmares have started again so any sleep he can get is precious and Karl won't stop him from finding it when he can. Sapnap isn't much better, honestly. It's a relief, and a rarity, to have them *both* sleeping peacefully. He doesn't wake them.

Instead, he goes downstairs. He lights the stove and puts the kettle on, stirring some dried lavender into his mug while he waits for the water to boil.

A routine has quickly emerged since their return; he puts another mug to the side once the water is ready; honey and lemon.

Soft footsteps pad down the stairs, and he calls out, quiet, "There's enough for two, if you want some."

Dream pops his head around the doorframe, looking almost sheepish.

“I thought I could sneak past you,” Dream says.

“Gods know we have enough firewood for the rest of time,” Karl says, “Will you two think of something to do other than chopping wood when you can’t sleep?”

Dream shrugs, “It’s what the guardmaster after Puffy used to make us do. If he caught us going out after hours. When we’re tired, we chop wood.”

“Good for the coming winter, I guess.”

Karl passes Dream the steaming mug of honey and lemon tea, and they sit opposite each other in the warmth of the kitchen. In the firelight, Dream’s new scars are smoother now that they’ve begun to properly heal. They’re still red; not with infection nor anything nefarious, but with the natural process that comes from a deep wound. They’re going to look badass when they’re fully healed, even if they’re still in the painful-looking stage for now.

The scar *shape*, Karl thinks, is what bothers Dream more than their existence. They’ve all been avoiding bringing it up, though that’s never exactly helped them solve their problems, historically. Karl hopes Dream decides to talk about it with one of them soon, but he doesn’t want to push just yet.

The monster’s claws weren’t kind, and neither was the subsequent fight, or trip through the Nether. Dream is very lucky not to have lost an eye, but he’d handled the change in vision with good humor. He’d spent the meandering trip home with an eyepatch on most of the time, making jokes about his pirate past coming back for him.

Despite the jokes, there is no denying the scars that cross the bridge of his nose, nor those which cut across his eyebrows. They make an X - so much like the X that had labeled a certain demigod’s mask that, if Karl hadn’t seen the wounds inflicted, he would have thought it was deliberate. It is only the scar that had already crossed his nose that saves it from being a morbid spitting image of XD’s porcelain face.

“Bad dreams?” Karl asks, after a long moment.

“Are there any other kind, at this point?” Dream asks, slumping at the table and playing with his mug. Sometimes he is good-natured about his insomnia, but sometimes he is gloomy and tonight - morning? - is one of those nights.

“The others are having good ones tonight, I think.”

“Well, not everyone got to wander a garden or have tea with a queen.” Dream scowls into his mug.

“That’s not fair,” Karl takes a sip of his mug, patiently waiting.

Dream sighs, long and hard, only a few seconds later. “I know. I know it’s not fair. I’m sorry. I just...you can’t tell me you don’t see it. Every time you close your eyes.”

Karl swallows. “You know I do.”

Karl hadn't had much experience with nightmares. They weren't ever something that happened, really - not to him. The past stayed in the past, and he had no regrets that followed him into his sleep. That had changed two years ago. After Schlatt, he'd had nightmares for the first time. Ones where Sapnap told them how much he hated them, betrayal in his eyes. Ones where Quackity turned blue under Schlatt's hand, prolonged and suffering. Ones where he'd failed.

Fortunately, they were few and far between. When he woke up, he'd always immediately known that it was a dream. He'd known that no matter what his mind might tell him, that it wasn't real.

Since he returned from the Nether nearly three months ago, Karl has had nightmares every night.

Sapnap, skin white, eyes blank, his flame gone. Quackity, neck bent at an unnatural angle, crying eyes staring accusingly at Karl. George, dripping red, red, red, his hand limp and forever reaching for Dream, not knowing how close he got. Dream, blind and helpless, frozen in place.

If Karl can't stop seeing it, then he can't imagine how it was for Dream. He doesn't want to think about how much worse it must be, to be left only with the worst of what your imagination can conjure.

Dream's eyes might have been maimed, but his hearing had been crystal clear. Clear enough to hear the clatter of Sapnap's sword on the floor, that awful squelch of hands in flesh. The abominable noise that was a neck snapping, and even worse, the crumble of limbs to the floor. The crunch as the husks stomped, the wet gasp of the sword in George's back, the last exhale.

"What's it like?" Karl asks, quietly, "In your dreams?"

Dream hums, taps the side of the mug. He's silent for a long time.

"I'm in the dark," He says, "I'm alone. I can hear you crying. Sapnap is screaming for George and for Q. For me. They keep yelling. They don't stop no matter how much I try to reach them. I swing my sword, trying to get at whatever is hurting them. And that's... that's when they stop."

Karl, with a moment's hesitation, reaches out and takes Dream's hand. To his relief, Dream doesn't pull away.

"And the worst part," Dream says, his voice thick, "Is that I'm *angry*. Because they didn't take me with them. Because they left me alone again, when they promised that they wouldn't. I wasn't...not in the dream, when they were really -" He swallows, unable to finish. "You changed, Karl. You disappeared. You - I just had to sit there. I had to sit there, and know they were all dead, and all I could do was hope that someone would finish me off too -"

"Dream -"

“- because I was too weak to do it myself -”

“Dream!” Karl says sharply, his grip tightening, “Don’t talk about yourself like that. It’s not allowed. I forbid it.”

That startles a laugh out of Dream, wiping his eyes with his free hand, “You sound like George.”

“Hopefully for the best.” Karl says, before pausing, “Have you told the others about how you’re feeling?”

Dream shrugs, “George knows. Kinda, I think. It’s been coming back in my dreams...the memories. I...I thought I was dead, at the end, and I was happy. At least I was with him and it was over.” Dream sighs, but doesn’t meet Karl’s eyes. “I don’t know how Sapnap did it. I lost them for barely any time at all and I just...I shut down. I gave up. Nothing mattered, because they were gone, and I was just waiting to join them. Sapnap...when I was gone, he got George out, he saved you both, he saved me, and when I was in a similar situation, I...I fell apart.”

“Hey, I fell apart, too,” Karl tries a joking tone but it falls flat on the table between their mugs, “I’m...I couldn’t handle it. It hurt less to be the thing I had been so afraid of than it hurt to deal with the pain of losing them. But, dude, that’s what she wanted. You can’t be a human and still be functional immediately after what we saw. Heard.” He winces. “Sorry.”

“I was supposed to keep you safe,” Dream says, a crack in his voice, in his armor. “I was supposed to get everyone out of the Nether alive. And I can’t stop thinking about all the different ways I failed. What I could have done differently.”

“There was nothing -”

“I didn’t see,” Dream says, plowing forward even as Karl goes to protest, “I couldn’t see, and I don’t - it plays behind my eyes every night and I don’t even know what *happened*. Just the outcome. I - I need to know so it will *stop*.”

Karl blinks at him, almost uncomprehending, “You want to know what I saw.”

“Yes,” Dream says, eyes fluttering rapidly as he fights back dampness, “That. I want to know what happened. I can’t live with what I keep imagining. It changes every time, and it’s worse every time.”

“It was fast.” Karl says, after a moment, “They didn’t....they didn’t suffer, mostly. Sapnap fell first. One of them put a hand through his chest and snuffed out his flame, easy as that. That’s why he didn’t respond when you called for him. He was already gone. I think we were all in shock, watching Sap - Q didn’t see the husk that got him. He didn’t even have time to scream. It broke his neck. It was instant.” It’s strange, how he speaks so clinically, so detached from what happened. But then again, if he wasn’t, if he didn’t tell it like a dusty history, then he would be sobbing.

“I think you did. Scream, I mean.” Dream says, quietly.

"I don't remember," Karl says, honestly. "It was so fast. It was all I could do, maybe. I remember it hurt. Like the husk had plunged his fist into my heart, not Sapnap's."

"...and George?" Dream asks, after a long moment.

"George, he -" Karl stops. He wonders if he should even tell Dream the particulars of what happened. As a human, he gets to choose. He's not forced to tell the truth. But he told Dream he wouldn't lie.

"George tried to get to you," Karl says, eventually, "He was stabbed, like that time Techno stabbed y-...XD. He tried to get to you. Crawled, by the end, but he was trying. You were... he reached for you. He missed. A husk skewered him through again and pinned him to the ground. That's what happened."

Dream trembles. He bows his head.

"It wasn't your fault, Dream," Karl says, softly, "There was *nothing* we could have done. Even if you weren't literally blind and concussed to shit, or if they weren't holding me down, we couldn't have made it in time."

"I could have *tried*," Dream says, savagely.

"You would have failed then, too." Karl says, and he doesn't want to be so blunt, but he needs Dream to understand. "We are five mortal men. She's an immortal Empress with an entire court of XDs, a literal army of undead soldiers, and powers even without them. There was *no* walking out of there by force, Dream. She's a cosmic fucking entity. You're good, but you're just a human man. On top of that, she wanted you for her court. There was no situation in which you died, same as me. The other three were expendable. We weren't. It's... it's just that simple."

"There had to have been something."

"No." Karl smiles grimly. "She wanted us like that. She wanted you broken. She wanted me feral. She was *letting* me throw a temper tantrum. She was waiting for me to get too tired to keep fighting. Then she would have taken us and she would have beaten us and molded us and made us into exactly what she wanted, knowing that we had nothing left to fight for. That's how that was going to end. You couldn't have killed yourself, even if you'd tried. Neither could I."

"I don't like the things you're saying." Dream takes a deep gulp of his tea, words rough. Karl knows that that tea is probably still scalding. Dream doesn't seem to notice.

"Me, either." Karl sighs, "But it's the truth."

"If all of that is true, how do we know that isn't what's going on right now?" Dream asks into the uneasy quiet.

"Now I don't like the things *you're* saying." Karl frowns. "What do you mean?"

“Sometimes, I wonder,” Dream replies, worrying his lip between his teeth, “Sometimes, I feel like I’m going to open my eyes, and I’ll be back there, in darkness, and with George’s body in my lap and the three of you out of reach. And no one is waking up. Sometimes the dream feels more real than...this. What if this is all just her...shaping us. Lulling us into compliance. Making us think we’re safe until she pulls the rug out from under us.”

“Dream, look at me,” Karl says. When he doesn’t, Karl reaches out and taps his hand firmly with his fingers, “Dream, you need to look at me.”

A moment later, scarred eyes meet golden ones.

“Listen,” Karl says, hooks their fingers and squeezes tight, “Have I ever lied to you?”

“I can think of one major time,” Dream starts, weakly, but Karl shakes his head.

“Nope, doesn’t count. You weren’t there when we started lying, plus pulling the XD card is a cop out. So. Have *I* ever lied to *you*?”

Karl watches Dream think, watches his eyebrow furrow adorably and his mouth curl up.

“...No.”

“Exactly,” Karl says, “And I won’t lie to you now. You’re real. This is real. George is sleeping upstairs, Sapnap and Quackity are sleeping upstairs. We’re all alive. So are they. We got out of the Nether.”

“I know.” Dream says unconvincingly.

“I have to repeat the same thing to myself, multiple times a day. It’s...it’s a mantra, and I say it all the time now. Every time I go to sleep, every time I wake up. When I see any of you, I have to tell myself that they’re alive, that we’re alive, that we made it out.” Karl leans forward insistently. “You’re not alone in this, Dream. We’re both...the shitty survivors. We’re in this together. No garden, no tea with a goddess. Just being alive in that hell until they came back for us.”

“...what if we’re both wrong?” Dream asks. “What if we’re still there, in the heat and the pain, and this is the last piece of comfort before we have to face the truth?”

Karl grips his hand tight. “Then we *make* it real. We take every moment we have and we make it worth more than any nightmare. If this is the dream, then I never want to wake up. But I know this is real, Dream, even if my nightmares tell me otherwise. Do you want to know why?”

Dream doesn’t answer, not verbally, but he holds Karl’s hand just as tightly.

“Because it wouldn’t hurt if it was a dream.” Karl says, “You wouldn’t have your scars if it was a dream. I wouldn’t have lost myself to the Vex if this was a dream. This is the *best* ending for us, and it still hurt. That’s how I know. Life hurts a lot sometimes. Dreams...even the worst dreams don’t compare to what life doles out, and let me just say, this chapter has

sucked. I'm ready for the next fucking page right now. I need a new subheading at the *very* least."

Dream laughs, and it sounds kind of like he's holding back tears.

"I wish I could believe that. I really wish I could."

"Then I'll believe enough for the both of us until you do." Karl says, firmly, "We survived. It fucking sucked, but we survived. Hold on to that. Or me. I can do either."

"Are you incapable of any conversation without flirting?" Dream asks, laughing wetly again, clearing in his throat, and Karl knows he's stopped Dream's spiral, at least for the moment.

"How do you think I ended up married?" Karl says, grinning.

"Exactly," Dream grumbles, even if his smile behind his mug of tea shows that he isn't actually grumpy, "Shouldn't that, like, preclude you from flirting with me?"

"Only if the others mind," Karl shrugs.

"What will we mind?" A voice, familiar and sleepy, comes from behind them.

George is yawning as he comes through the door, but Karl can see the way that Dream perks up the moment he enters the room. He rolls his eyes; wasn't *he* supposed to be the newlywed?

"Nothing at all," Dream says, softening as he turns to look at George over his shoulder. "Why aren't you asleep?"

"Why aren't *you*?" George asks, "You left the bed and winter is coming. I was *cold*, Dream."

"I apologize, Your Majesty," Dream says, "How could I regain favor?"

George drapes himself over the back of the chair, which means he's draped over almost the entirety of Dream, tucking his face into Dream's messy hair. "Come back to bed," he mumbles.

"You see why I think I'm dreaming?" Dream turns back to Karl, letting go of Karl's fingers to reach up and hold George's arms where they're wrapped around his shoulders. "Most people wake up *from* a beautiful king begging them to come to bed, not wake up *to* it."

"You're tellin' me," Karl winks and George snorts, tired amusement as he looks up at Karl through his lashes.

George drops a kiss to the crown of Dream's head, "*I'm* telling my knight errant to come keep me warm. It's getting cold again. I can't believe we missed the nicest seasons to fucking adventure. I wanted to see the stupid forest turn this autumn. Now I'll have to wait until next year. How could you do this to me, Dream?"

“I’m sorry.” Dream looks up, gets a light kiss to his lips that has him smiling. “I just had...a bad dream. Karl was helping me process.”

“I know about your little midnight tea parties, I get it.” George acknowledges, dropping another kiss to Dream’s chin, “You’re allowed to have them, but half an hour is pushing it. Now thank Karl and come along. You both should be in bed right now and my feet are freezing.”

“Sounding particularly kingly, there, George.” Karl smiles, finishing his tea. “Did your stint go to your head?”

George scoffs. “Yes, but only from dusk to dawn, when I’m left to shiver myself silly. The monarchy jumps out.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Dream rolls his eyes, standing up. George’s arms slide from his shoulders to hug his waist as he goes too high for it to be comfortable. “Spoiled.”

“Hey,” Karl smiles, fond as he watches them tease each other. “His icy toes on your leg should be enough to prove that you’re awake, if all else fails.”

“Maybe the most convincing thing you’ve said yet,” Dream agrees, and then jumps when George pinches his sides, “*George!*”

“I’m sick of asking, so now I’m ordering. Come to *bed*, idiot.” George complains, “And you, too, Karl. Enough moping in the kitchen at ugly hours, both of you.”

“Yes, George.” Karl grins wider.

“Yes, George.” Dream repeats, fond. To Karl, he says, “Thank you for the tea. And...and the chat.”

“Same time tomorrow?” Karl asks, only half joking.

“I hope not.” Dream sighs, but it’s not too upset. “You’re okay? We didn’t discuss you much tonight.”

“I’m better.” Karl promises and means it. “You always know what I wanna talk about. It’s a gift.”

Dream smiles and George gives Karl a grateful look over his shoulder, which makes Karl warm in ways the tea hadn’t.

They shuffle out together, wrapped up in each other. Karl hopes Dream gets at least a little more sleep tonight. Maybe Karl should add another enchantment to the cloak to help with undisturbed slumber.

Karl takes another hour to himself. He pours himself another mug of tea, thinks about his conversation with Dream, and finds that he does, actually, feel better, too. He writes a little, sketches a flower he’d seen blooming in Quackity’s herb garden despite Quackity’s best efforts.

The sky is turning pink by the time Karl makes his way back upstairs. He likes the early morning, when the light peeks above the horizon of the world, the way that even in the warmer months, the air is crisp until the sunlight chases it away.

As poetic as it is, he likes their bedroom more. It's warm, and cosy, and his husbands are there, waiting for him to join them.

What is also there is the egg. *Her*. He can't really pretend he hasn't joined Quackity in thinking about the egg as a *her*, that he hasn't grown much too attached, much too quickly, to this new character in their little story. She's going to be their newest plot twist, and she brings such a host of recurring side characters that it's difficult to not get a bit overwhelmed.

They had put aside a room for her, but had quickly thought better of it when Quackity got up several times in the night to make sure everything was alright. He'd confessed to them, under the blankets, after they brought the egg back into their room, that he was scared that if anything happened to her, their lives would be forfeit. That he would come back and find only their lifeless corpses.

To fix that issue, in the end, the egg remains in their room, and Quackity sleeps through the night, as best he can. It's in a pile of cushions and blankets next to the fire that they have all avoided calling a nest, for risk of facing Quackity's ire.

For all that it's their room, there's evidence of the others here as well, in her little corner. Quackity's guitar lies propped up next to George's ukulele, the two of them bouncing off each other and bickering as George tries to get the hang of it. Dream has a notebook off to the side, filled with bits and pieces of lyrics that he sometimes fits to the music George makes. There's Karl's book, a history of magic, with his bookmark halfway through. Sapnap likes to sit and listen, head in Karl's lap, as he reads aloud to both him and the egg.

In the bed, his husbands sleep peacefully. Quackity has his face mashed into the natural pillows of Sapnap's chest and Sapnap has a hand resting on Quackity's wings, which flutter every so often in time with his snores. It's a sight he never thought he would have; it's a sight that he'll never get sick of. His heart will never be as full as it is now. When he climbs into bed, he'll press his vows over and over again to their skin, and he'll never get tired of saying them, just as they won't ever get tired of hearing them.

Not wanting to disturb them, at least not immediately, he goes to the egg. She's truly beautiful, if he forgets where and *who* she came from. Speckled in purple hues, like a multicolored night sky, occasionally rocking as the creature inside gets closer and closer to hatching, she's charming in the way that a scary new creature might be.

When he runs his hands over the shell, he finds that he agrees with Kristin; Wilbur doesn't deserve anything as beautiful as this. Those weren't the words Quackity used, but he's pretty sure that's what she said to Quackity and he'd just found a nicer way of relaying the message.

The egg is warm beneath his fingers, and he can almost imagine a hum, a movement where the bulk of the dragon's body is pressed to where his hand is.

Through the slit in the curtains, the sun finally rises fully, and a brilliant beam of unfiltered, early morning sunlight pierces through the dust.

Where it hits the egg, Karl can see it clearly. A crack, snaking all the way down from the top to the base. The first of many, he would imagine. He can't help the smile spreading across his face, wide and wondrous.

"Hey there, little one." He whispers, kneeling down so he can be closer. He hopes she can hear him. "You nearly ready to come out now?"

In response, there is a slight rocking. Karl chuckles.

"It's okay," Karl says, "Take your time. You're safe with us. We'll be here when you're ready."

This time, he hears it; the slightest crack, the smallest sound of a calcified eggshell beginning to come apart.

Karl doesn't know if they'll be ready - if they'd *ever* truly be ready. This is a step he never imagined, a responsibility so huge that they can barely comprehend it. But he already loves this creature, as impossible as she is, and he knows he's only going to love her more once she arrives. He owes his life and the lives of his family to her and he's going to make sure that Kristin doesn't regret the deal she made.

He leans in close, and his voice comes as barely a breath. A promise, meant for her, and her alone.

"Welcome home."

Chapter End Notes

Please check out each of these artists, and everyone we've ever linked on this fic! they're so incredibly talented and remember to check out #scarecrowau on twitter for all the art that will come after we post as well!! Plus, follow me and hannah, because we will always rt art that we see from this fic :D Also check out our twitters for links to other projects we do and continue to support us!

[Ghost](#) who continues to hurt us with incredible art.

[Karl!](#) reading the hard copy version of wtsd in a wonderful portrait
[a beautiful look at dream's scars!](#)

coda: nothing you can say can stop me going home

Chapter Notes

hello! welcome to coda 2 :) im so glad that we were able to get this together in time for october asdjfkl honestly it was a big surprise that i returned to this project bc i just decided to take a break from writing mcyt. im glad that it is in october tho, the symmetry of wtsd coda was worth the late nights!!!! i have so many ppl i want to thank fo rmaking this series what it is. thank u to jess and marrow for betaing this coda. thank u to perseus for being you and helping me thru so much over the last year, esp with regard to this fic! thank u to the discord as a whole for being so supportive and positive, thank u to ghost for ur AMAZING art and for encouraging us not to give up on this! thank u to the twitter friends who tweeted and shared art and thoughts about our fic(s)! most importantly, thank u to mari for going on this journey with me. its been such an insane. INSANE adventure. i couldnt have picked a better friend to go on it with me!!! i love u!!!!!!!!!!

p.s. thank u to our readers <3 i hope u enjoyed this coda to home
P.s.s. if you are interested, subscribe to the series! In the next few days, we will be posting a couple not!fic for a few other concepts in this au :)

GOSH OKAY JUST A QUICK NOTE FROM ME (BRAMBLE/MJ?MARI) but I adore all of the scarecrow discord so much, thank you all so much for making such a wonderful community with us, I am so proud of all of you and this one is for you. To Jess and Marrow - Jess who we couldn't do without and Marrow for stepping in last minute and zooming through those edits to get this out on time. To Persy, for keeping the server in check, dad style, while I panicked over my dissertation and Hannah wrote like a demon to finish this. My gf, who will never see this but has been the best support I could ask for. And to Hannah - my partner in crime, my drift compatible co-pilot, a soulmate I just haven't met yet, I love you so much, thank you for dragging me along on this crazy adventure.

And to you all - you who read, who comented, left kudos, translated, made art, all of you - thank you so much. It wouldn't be what it is without you. We hope you enjoy this as much as we enjoyed writing this series <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They've been told that, one day, the breath of the Guardian of the End will be lethal.

In Sapnap's experience, it certainly smells it.

"Mels," he groans, as a wet snout is shoved into his face and purple particles settle over him, thankfully not enough to do anything but jolt him slightly. "Go back to sleep."

Mellon just huffs again. It expels more of her breath straight into his face, and he *knows* that it's on purpose. She long ago worked out how to rouse him as soon as she wants him. He feels himself lift from off of the bed and then flop back against it, shaking the frame with a flurry of blankets. Quackity and Karl have already grown far too used to this particular method of her waking him up and both of them sleep blissfully through it, ignoring his plight.

He cracks an eye open, huffing himself; smoke billows back at her and she sneezes, eyes narrowing into thin slits of annoyance.

"Yeah, I can do it, too, kid," he grouches.

In response, she takes the blanket between her teeth and starts pulling.

"Mels, *no*, this is the fifth blanket this month!" He tries to be firm, but when Mels makes up her mind, it's almost impossible to change. He's sure that's George's influence, the motherfucker. "Why are you up so early? You're gonna be grumpy later, and *I'm* the one who's gonna have to deal with it."

Mels tugs hard at the blanket again and, when she meets his resistance, yields. He thinks he's convinced her, just long enough for her to nuzzle her way under the edge of the covers and snag his ankle with a clawed paw, yanking hard enough that his leg falls off the bed and nearly takes her with him, saved only by his quick reflexes. He's up and grabbing her before it even registers, and then he's sitting on the edge of the bed, dragon daughter firmly in hands.

"*Mellon*." He says severely, trying to be annoyed, but it's hard. She's excited, he can tell from how her paws scrabble at his arms to cling, careful of her claws so she doesn't scratch him, and how her wings flutter behind her. She's grown so *big*, he thinks fondly, in the several years since her hatching. She's grown heavy, too; her small form is nearly too dense for him to hold up like this for long, her tail tangling and swaying under her, the tip smacking against the floor.

She simply breathes in his face again.

"Gods, you *stink*." He wrinkles up his nose, "When was the last time you brushed your teeth, young lady?"

She *meeps*, ears folding back.

"That's what I thought," he admonishes. "Go bother Dream and George or we're going straight to the bathroom to scrub those fangs of yours down until they're sparkling."

Mel makes a low growling noise. From any other creature, it might be scary. Sapnap is well aware that it's just her being dramatic.

"Don't take that tone with me." He gives her a gentle shake and then pulls her close, curling her into his chest and flopping back down onto the bed with a huff of effort. He just hugs her tighter when she wriggles. "Nope, you're trapped now. We're going back to sleep."

Quackity's breathing hitches, a natural sound that still catches Sapnap's attention and he turns his head slightly to the side. To his left, his husbands sleep; quiet snores from Quackity and deep, slow breaths from Karl that let him know they're both still peaceful in slumber, despite the eight-pound dragon in their bed. Karl's hair is a mess, bedhead from his curls rubbing against the pillows in a restless sleep and Quackity's face is smushed into one of the pillows, his arm slung across Karl's body when he'd grown sick of Karl's rolling and pinned him down last night.

Sapnap takes a moment to mentally snapshot the image. It's the last time he'll get to see it for the next few weeks.

Mel, annoyed that she is no longer the center of his attention, shoves her nose into his chest again with such force that it knocks the breath from his lungs.

"Ow," He complains, turning back to look at her. She's giving him the biggest puppy-dog eyes, which only intensifies after he brings up a hand and scratches her at that one spot he knows she likes in particular.

"I get it," he says, and she grumbles again, going limp on his chest and practically paralyzing his lungs, "I get it, Mels, I don't wanna leave either."

Sapnap sits up again, slowly this time, and presses a kiss to her snout, cradling her close in a way that really only he and Dream are able to do anymore. She's grown so *big* in the last six months. "It's just for a little while, sweetheart. And I'll be back and I'll bring some new... family, I guess, for you to meet. Aren't you ready to meet Puffy and Foolish outside of their letters? Besides, you'll have your favorite friend to keep you busy, yeah? You'll barely notice I'm gone, Mels, I promise. Besides, you already know who's coming today. You're excited, aren't you?"

Mel is still giving him those eyes, but he feels her tail pick up and begin thump against the bed in her excitement.

"Yeah, I bet you are." Sapnap grins, before groaning as he hauls himself out of bed, still holding her tight. "C'mon, let's brush those teeth and get you some breakfast."

She huffs, tail wrapping around his waist and her head hooking over his shoulder, a mournful keen at the idea of taking care of her teeth.

"You made it!" Sapnap bubbles, and right now, it doesn't matter that he is older, arguably wiser, and a father himself - he hasn't seen his parents in ages, and he missed them. Life is always just a little easier when they're around, even if they drive him up the wall.

"Pandas!" Bad turns from Dream, who's just been freshly released from his own hug, and Sapnap bolts straight for him, flinging himself into his father's arms at a dead sprint. Bad catches him easily, picking him up and swinging him around in equal excitement.

"Sorry," Sapnap laughs when he hears Bad's back cracking, his feet dropping back down to the dirt, "Maybe I'm too big for that now."

“Never, cub.” Bad says warmly, “I’ve got at least a hundred more years in me before I can’t lift my own son!”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Sapnap takes a step back to look Bad over; he looks good. Tall and filled out, the stress of Kinoko nowhere to be seen. He’s glowing, actually, though Sapnap expected nothing less when his family have come for this particular occasion. He has a feeling *he’s* glowing, too, despite his upcoming journey to Pandora. Skeppy’s probably been crying since they got the invitation last year.

“And *where* is my granddaughter?” Bad makes a show of looking over Sapnap’s shoulder, purposefully overlooking Mellon, who’s practically vibrating at Sapnap’s knee, betraying her own barely-held excitement. “I can’t seem to find her!”

Mel makes a loud, croaking noise, shoving onto her back legs and displaying her wings, trying to catch his attention.

“Is she not here?” Bad teases, dropping his eyes when she makes a louder growling noise and flaps her wings hard, “Oh, there she is! What are you doing down there, little lady?”

He opens his arms to her and it takes barely a moment for Mel to leap upwards, staggering Bad in her enthusiasm.

“Careful!” Dream says gently, though he’s obviously amused. “Watch your claws, Mellon.”

“It’s okay,” Bad says, bending under the weight and enthusiasm with faux strain. “It’s not like I didn’t get scratches from you, Sapnap.”

“I didn’t have piercing claws,” Sapnap reminds him, admonishing. “Listen to Dream, Mels.”

Mel huffs, but she tucks in her claws, nosing at Bad’s neck before wriggling to get put down, her tail thumping rapidly against his body until she’s back on the ground.

“Are you looking for-” Bad starts to ask with amusement, just when Skeppy makes his way around to the side of the house, and Mel goes wild with excitement, only Dream’s quick grip stopping her from bolting. She’s always liked Skeppy in particular; Karl hypothesizes it’s something to do with his diamond skin and dragon hoards, but right now Sapnap is inclined to believe it’s to do with the toddler in Skeppy’s arms.

“Mel!” Eryn shrieks, evidently as delighted and excited as Mel is, holding out his pudgy hands for her, nearly toppling out of Skeppy’s grip in his own enthusiasm. “Mellie, Mel, Mellie!”

“Go on,” Skeppy sets Eryn down and Dream slowly does the same with Mellon after a whisper in her ear that has her calming her wildly swinging tail. “Be free, gremlins.”

What follows is two minutes of utter chaos as the two children - one vaguely mortal, one entirely otherworldly - jump and dance around each other, grabbing and twisting until it’s difficult to tell who exactly is who. Mel is vocalizing in the high, happy way that means she

is almost entirely overjoyed, and it's this, more than anything, that prompts Sapnap to step in, and pull Mel away from his little brother before the happiness overwhelms either of them.

"Hey, hey, what did we talk about, guys?"

It's difficult to get her attention to focus back on him when Eryn is pulling at her wings and throwing his arms around her neck, so he carefully pulls Eryn's arms off of her and has them both stand still so he can kneel to their level.

"Mellon, Eryn isn't as hardy as me or your dads, okay? He's little, you have to be careful with him. Eryn, we don't pull on her wings, right? They're sensitive."

"Sorry." Eryn wrings his hands, pouting. "I won't pull."

Mellon huffs again, though she doesn't dare to release any particles. She learned early on that those weren't allowed around Eryn, thank the gods.

"Good." Sapnap grins, ruffling Eryn's hair to get him to smile. "Thanks for listening. You guys can play, but be *gentle*."

Mellon nods her head, though she's still top-heavy enough that it almost tips her forward without Sapnap's hand on her shoulder. He stands again and lets them go back to playing, amused at the delicate way they touch each other until they get more comfortable again.

"Where was this attitude when you started braining me the second you could open your eyes?" Skeppy grumbles.

"She takes after me too much for me not to worry," Sapnap says, smiling ruefully as Dream comes to watch them roughhouse with him.

"What is this? Not even a hug from either of you? Did Bad poison you against me?" Skeppy asks and Bad splutters, yelping in protest as Sapnap turns to Skeppy to sweep him up in a tight hug.

"Hello, Sap," Skeppy hugs him back, a careful hand settling on the back of his head. "Long time no see."

"I saw you like five months ago," Sapnap scoffs, stepping back to look Skeppy over, too. Like Bad, he seems healthy and happy. Like Sapnap predicted, he seems like he's swallowed the sun.

"That's *forever*. I'm going to make your father retire soon. I'm sick of this." Skeppy shoots Bad a teasing look and Bad takes it with grace, having become a climbing toy for the children.

"How's the terrible twos going?" Sapnap asks, with a grin, and Skeppy's face falls in his dramatic way.

"I thought it was supposed to *end* at two, not stretch into fours," he says. "You were such a relaxed child. I'm hoping Mel will tire him out, I'm too old for this shit."

“Language!” Bad says, only to be distracted by a wayward paw to the face, “Help!”

“Let him suffer.” Skeppy waves him off, turning to look at Dream.

Dream’s been a nervous wreck for the last week; Sapnap thinks he’s more nervous about this trip than Sapnap is. But he seems to relax under Skeppy’s gaze.

“Hi, Skep.”

“Dream,” Skeppy says, and his voice immediately breaks. “Come here right now.”

Dream does and Skeppy hugs him tight enough that it looks a little painful.

“It’s finally happening,” Skeppy mumbles, just loud enough to be heard. “Gods, I’m so excited. I’m so ready! What if we do it tonight, instead?”

Dream giggles, high-pitched with nerves. “Four weeks. No one else is set to be here until a couple days before.”

“Haven’t I waited long enough?” Skeppy pulls back, blinking rapidly. “I’m on my deathbed, Dream. Don’t let me leave this world without seeing the two of you wed!”

Sapnap rolls his eyes. “Do your best to hold tight to your mortal coil, I won’t even be here tonight.”

“You’re leaving today?” Bad pipes up, sounding disappointed. “We’ll barely see you!”

“I’m set to be back a week before the day,” Sapnap promises, perhaps more for Dream and Mel’s benefit than his parents or Eryn, who loves him dearly but is much more interested in his niece than in his older brother. “We’ll have plenty of time to catch up once I drag the pirates back.”

“You don’t have to drag anyone.” Dream clears his throat, “If she’s busy, or -”

“Dream,” Sapnap cuts him off, “I promised you that she would be here and the only way she’s *not* going to be here is if I kill her first, understand? She’s coming.”

“Puffy told me she’d be here, too,” Skeppy adds. “This is all she’s talked about for a year, Dream. She wants to be here.”

“She might have changed her mind,” Dream says, but he’s starting to smile, which is a relief. Things have been so *good* these last few years, Sapnap would hate for what’s supposed to be a happy event to put Dream into a tailspin. Of course it’s *Puffy’s* presence that’s causing him the most anxiety.

That’s why Sapnap offered to go to Pandora in the first place, ostensibly to be a guide since Puffy hasn’t actually been landlocked since she left Kinoko and Dream was concerned she’d get lost. Truly, Sapnap is going because he’s dragging her here by her hair if he has to, and he’ll take Foolish, too, since he has a free hand. They’ll be at this damn wedding or their days are numbered, and Sapnap has a feeling George will get to them first if that happens.

“She hasn’t.” Sapnap says firmly. “She said in her last letter that she’s coming, so she’s coming. Just trust me, dude, I won’t let you down. I’ll make sure she’s here.”

“I do trust you,” Dream says immediately. It’s taken a lot of time and healing, but Sapnap believes him.

“And while Sapnap is gone, Bad and I are going to help get this place up to the job.” Skeppy puts his hands on his hips. “No one needs to stress about anything. This is going to go off without a hitch.”

Bad is finally knocked to the ground with a shriek and Sapnap exchanges an amused glance with both his dad and his best friend.

He hopes Skeppy’s words are right but, with their luck, he has a feeling things won’t be as smooth as he desperately wishes they’d be.

“You’re sure you don’t want to go with him?” Quackity asks over lunch, poking at his steak. Mellon has settled into his lap and opens her mouth occasionally for him to drop chunks of meat into, and is content to not be the center of her dad’s attention as long as he feeds her on command, which has done wonders for everyone else being able to eat.

“I’m okay.” Karl shakes his head, though his grip on Sapnap’s hand doesn’t lessen. “Sapnap has a quest to complete, and so do we. *Someone* has to plan this thing while he’s gone, and only we share his vision.”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve caught a glimpse of it a time or two,” George says mildly. “It’s my wedding, you see.”

“No, it’s *Dream’s* wedding. You’re part of the decor,” Sapnap corrects, and Karl slaps a hand over his mouth to hide his giggling.

“Hey!” George frowns, but his lips twitch, giving him away. “Watch it, Sapnap, or you might be on the No Entry list of a certain prince.”

Dream rolls his eyes, Eryn happily perched in his lap just as Mellon is in Quackity’s. “There’s no No Entry list,” he says. “And this is George’s wedding, too, everyone. Let’s relax.”

“*You* relax,” Karl says earnestly. “Neither of you have to worry about anything. Quackity and I have the vision, we have the skills, we have the lists and the to-dos. It’s going to be everything your nine-year-old self imagined.”

“I hope not.” Dream pulls a face. “I had no idea what a wedding was supposed to be like back then. I thought we’d hold hands down the aisle and then go live together in a different castle.”

“We can hold hands down the aisle if you want,” George allows magnanimously. “But I draw the line at moving into a castle. The mansion is big enough.”

“What we’re trying to say is that we’ve got it handled,” Quackity says as he feeds Mellon another piece of steak, much to her vocal enjoyment. “You and George don’t need to be worried about anything, because we’re going to set everything up. And Sapnap doesn’t need to worry about anything except bringing Puffy and Foolish in from Pandora because Bad and Skeppy are here to help. You just focus on building your gazebo and we’ll do the rest.”

“Absolutely,” Bad agrees, “Skep and I are here to mind the children and organize things. We’ll make sure the mansion doesn’t burn down.”

“As long as it’s just the guest quarters, I don’t mind if it burns down a little.” George sniffs, and Sapnap finds himself smiling despite the low-grade anxiety in his gut. This will be the first time that they’re splitting the party since they came back from Kinoko nearly - shit, nearly five years ago. It’s the first time he’s going to be away from Mels since she was hatched. It feels wrong to leave now, when he knows that Dream and George are both nervous about a wedding they’ve finally felt settled enough to have, and he doesn’t at all know how Mellon will handle his absence. And of course he trusts his husbands and his parents, but he’s had the details of this ceremony memorized since he was a child and what if he forgot to write something down before he leaves? What if Dream doesn’t finish the gazebo in time and they have to get married in a half-finished carpentry project?

Okay, so maybe he’s as stressed about it as the grooms are.

He wants the day to be perfect. After everything that the two of them and their relationship endured, they deserve a perfect wedding, exactly like they’d made sure Sapnap got. He wants the cake and the decorations and the perfect ceremony and a beautiful setting with apples just beginning to swell on the trees and the gazebo Dream has been working towards on-and-off for nearly the entire season.

He’s anxious to leave, but he owes this to them, so he’s going to do it. Sapnap’s going to make sure that Dream’s family, as complicated as that word is for them, is here for his wedding, just like he’s always imagined. And Sapnap’s going to trust that the four people he’s leaving in charge know him enough to be able to do this for him while he’s gone.

Lunch continues; it’s lively and relaxed and happy, though Mellon grows increasingly agitated the closer to Sapnap’s departure time they get. When the food is gone and they’ve all pitched in to clean up, Skeppy and Eryn go off to fetch Sapnap’s pack and prepare Patches, who’ll be making the journey with him.

Mel wraps herself around him like she had this morning, hooking her face over his shoulder and her tail around his waist, while Karl continues to hold his hand for dear life and Quackity sticks close, pretending that he’s simply busy with this or that.

“You really don’t have to go,” Dream says, arms crossed, once Patches has been brought over and Skeppy has begun latching on Sapnap’s pack. “They can find their way.”

“I’m going,” Sapnap insists, despite the urge in him to take Dream up on the offer. “I’ll only be gone for a couple weeks. We’ll have plenty of time when I’m back to fix anything that’s been fucked up.”

“Nothing will be fucked up!” Quackity protests indignantly. “We’re going to follow your directions to the letter, so if anything’s fucked up, it’s because you wrote it that way.”

Sapnap laughs, hugging Mellon closer to him when he hears a quiet, plaintive rumble.

“Now, Mels. Remember the rules; no breathing fire and no particles until I’m back. I don’t want to hear anything about Eryn learning to fly while I’m gone, do you hear me?”

She rumbles again, lifting her head up and craning her neck back to stare at him with wide, bright eyes. She blinks rapidly and he nods along, knowing what she’s trying to say even without words.

“I’ll miss you, too.” He motions with a foot and George is the one to come over, arms outstretched for her to transfer over. “Make sure everyone’s on their best behavior for me, okay?”

“Come on, Watermelon, let’s let Sap head off before it starts to get dark.” George tugs at her gently and she goes with a pitiful whine, throwing herself into George and wrapping around him as she starts to make loud, bleating sounds. Crying.

It breaks Sapnap’s heart. He feels his face fall, guilt immediately bubbling up. George pats her back and rubs up and down her spine soothingly, starting to rock.

“Big feelings,” he says, which Sapnap can only assume he got from all of the parenting books he made Dream read to him.

“I’m sure she’s not the only one with big feelings,” Karl says defensively, sniffing.

“I need all of you to keep it together.” George snaps his fingers at them. “If you start crying and that makes me cry, I’m going to be pissed. I’m not crying because Sapnap is taking a short trip to Pandora. I’m *not*.”

George is not crying, indeed, but the rims of his eyes have started to redden.

Dream takes a deep, shaky breath. “Maybe we didn’t make the healthiest choices when it comes to codependency.”

“We rarely make healthy choices.” Quackity wraps an arm around George’s shoulder and leans in to kiss Mellon on the snout, which quiets her bleating into softer whines.

“It’ll be fine,” Sapnap says, putting on a brave face. “This is good for us. Separating sometimes isn’t the end of the world. We’ll all be fine.”

“I am going to have a panic attack the moment I can’t see you on the road anymore.” Karl says, and it’s a joke but it’s also not.

“We’ll be here.” Dream reaches over and squeezes Karl’s shoulder. “This’ll be fine. Why don’t we just cancel the wedding?”

“We’re not canceling the wedding,” Sapnap insists. “This is fine. We’re fine. I’m leaving.”

He doesn't move, and neither do any of them. Bad and Skeppy, arranging Patches, pretend like they can't hear everything.

"What if you didn't, though," George says after a short pause. "I don't *care*, but what if you just stayed here, actually, and none of us left."

"It's normal to feel anxious and sad about someone going on a trip without the rest of us," Quackity insists. "This is normal and we're being totally normal about it."

"We're totally normal about this," Sapnap agrees, though he knows he's lying. It probably shouldn't feel like he's talking himself into cutting his own fingers off right now, but it very much does.

It's Dream who breaks. "We're not being normal about this," he says, "I don't want you to go."

Sapnap takes a deep breath. "I know. I don't want to go. But I'm going, and you'll all be fine, and I'll be back, and we'll be able to say that it sucked but we did it."

Karl turns Sapnap to face him, his brows slanted into a serious expression.

"Sapnap," Karl says firmly. "Remember that for every step you take away from us, you take a piece of my heart with you. When you're ready to return, just follow the trail my love has left in your wake and it'll bring you back home to us."

"Okay." Sapnap agrees, matching his serious tone. "I'll do my best. What if your love can't extend all the way to Pandora? I'll leave a marker or something if it ends before I'm there."

"For you, my dear husband, my love would extend infinitely. It would coat the ground you tread unceasingly. Even if you traversed every inch this realm has to offer you, from the lowest floors of the ocean to the highest peaks of the tallest mountain, still there would be more waiting to find home in the indent of your next footprint."

"Oh, good, so no worries." Sapnap nods. "I'll keep it in mind."

Karl breaks, a smile lighting up his cheeks, though one edged with fretting, and Sapnap can't resist leaning in to kiss him tenderly. Karl melts, squeezing Sapnap's hand hard enough to hurt.

"I'll be back," Sapnap promises.

"I know," Karl promises back.

Sapnap finds Quackity next, who is still next to George, watching them both fondly. When Sapnap offers a hand, Quackity takes it and allows himself to be pulled into a kiss of his own. Sapnap is gentle but Quackity's kiss holds a hint of desperation, an arm hooking around his neck and pulling him close.

"Please don't get hurt," Quackity says against his lips. "We are already so fucked up, I can't handle any more trauma, Sapnap."

“No more trauma,” Sapnap chuckles, pulling him into a close hug. “I’ll do my best. I’ll come back whole and hardy, I swear.”

“You’d better. Raising a dragon is a five-person job, any less and we’ll be overrun.” Quackity tucks his face in, wings dropping along his back. Sapnap longs to touch them one last time and, perhaps sensing the direction of his thoughts, Quackity extends one, feathers fluffing. Carefully, Sapnap skims along the top, soft brown feathers ruffling pleasantly under his touch. He commits it to memory, a hundred-thousandth snapshot of touching one of his husbands so intimately, and he files it away with all of the other memories he’s made a point to keep close.

The hug must end eventually, though, and Quackity retreats to Karl, who reluctantly releases Sapnap’s hand to properly hug him. They hold each other to resist clinging on to him and Sapnap is glad that they’ll at least have each other while he’s away. Sapnap turns to Dream and George, now standing together and watching. George’s eyes have calmed but Dream’s have only gotten worse. He blinks and Sapnap would sigh except that he’s feeling on the same edge.

“I’m going to be fine. Stop worrying.”

“No.” George scoffs, holding Mellon tighter. “And you can’t make me.”

“I can’t,” Sapnap admits. “But worrying won’t change anything.”

“Oh, shut it.” George looks away. “Leave, then. See if I care.”

“Be safe,” Dream says firmly. “Keep an eye out. Make camp in safe places and don’t stray too far from the path so you don’t get lost. Don’t rise to any bait when you see her, and -”

“I know, Dream.” Sapnap laughs, offering a hand. Dream clasps it in his and tugs Sapnap into a tight, firm hug.

“Listen to him, idiot,” George scolds, “he’s giving you good advice. If something happens, you’re on your own, so-”

“Just come here,” Sapnap demands and yanks George into the hug, too, Mellon squished between them.

George huffs again, but he hugs Sapnap just as tight as Dream does, and the three of them cling more than hug for a good, long few seconds.

“If you die, I’m going to be so pissed,” George whispers. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

“I won’t. Knight’s honor.” Sapnap knocks his forehead to George’s, careful not to be too harsh, and then does the same to Dream, less carefully. “I’ll be back.”

“Okay.” Dream clears his throat, carefully letting him go. “Have a good trip.”

George just turns his nose up, going for nonchalant. It doesn’t work.

Sapnap shifts around his side to see Mellon, hoping to give her one last goodbye, but she glares at him and turns away, huffing smoke from her nostrils.

“Oh, Mels, are you mad at me? I promise I’ll be back.” He tries, but she just huffs louder, and he has to give up. He pats her back one last time and then forces himself to step away, disengaging from the circle that the six of them have made together.

Bad and Skeppy are waiting by Patches, Eryn happily settled on her back and petting her neck as gingerly as a freshly-scolded toddler can.

“You’re off?” Bad asks as Sapnap approaches and Sapnap nods, doing his best to not look over his shoulder and back at the family he’s leaving behind.

“I am.” Sapnap forces himself to smile. “Keep an eye on Mels, okay, Eryn? She’s gonna need a friend while I’m gone.”

“Okay!” Eryn agrees readily. “Be good, Pandas!”

“I’ll be good.” Sapnap reaches up and ruffles Eryn’s hair, laughing when he feels Eryn heat up under his touch. Skeppy snatches him off Patches just in time for his shirt collar to catch fire and crackle merrily as Eryn giggles.

“Oh, geez, not another one,” Bad frets, patting the fire out quickly. While he’s frantic about it, Skeppy just holds Eryn with his diamond armor activated everywhere except for his face, which looks amused and unsurprised.

“Be careful,” Skeppy warns him, settling Eryn on his hip while Bad continues to coo over his burning shirt. “Try to have a good time. It’s not every day that you’re going to get this much time to yourself as a parent.”

“Don’t I know it.” Sapnap sighs. “The two of them are going to be a nightmare.”

“Who knows, maybe it’ll get a baby fever going in this house.” Skeppy elbows him, grinning wickedly. “I wouldn’t say no to another grandbaby or five.”

Sapnap finds himself smiling despite himself. The ache is old now, even if it sometimes feels as fresh as the moment the Blaze Empress said the words. He’s used to Skeppy and Bad hinting for more grandchildren to have around - Sapnap had always wanted a big family when he was older, and they love Mellon with enough excess that he knows they’d find room in their hearts for a few more.

He hasn’t told either of them the truth about the Nether. With so much time between that adventure and their lives now, Sapnap isn’t sure that he’ll ever feel the need to. He thinks it would only cause them needless pain; that his parents would mourn what the five of them have lost more deeply than even they do, if he told them about the conditions to Karl’s release.

Instead of being sharp, which had been his first few responses, he settles on something closer to the truth.

“Mellon is a handful enough.” He looks at Eryn fondly. “And a second little gremlin running around every once in a while is the second hand’s worth of trouble. I’m happy with the family we’ve built.”

“Ugh, fine,” Skeppy sighs. “Crush my dreams of a legion of little winged fire demons with chestnut curls, why don’t you.”

“I’m so sorry,” Sapnap laughs, only somewhat forcibly, as if those thoughts haven’t haunted his own dreams on occasion. “I’ll try to be a better baby machine in the next life.”

“You’d better.” Skeppy wipes a fake tear out of his eye. “Robbed, I say.”

“Weren’t we all,” Sapnap jokes, though it’s not a joke at all.

“As much as I’d love for you to stay,” Bad chimes in, “it really will be dark by the time you reach the first camping spot if you don’t leave now, cub.”

“I know, I know.” Sapnap pulls Skeppy and Eryn into a quick hug and then swings himself onto Patches, who whinnies softly but doesn’t make much more noise than that. She seems in a good mood, and he hopes she maintains that attitude without Dream around to calm her on the journey.

“Contact us if there’s any problem.” Bad pats his knee, a bit shorter than him now that Sapnap is on the horse. “I’ll be there the second you need me.”

“Okay,” Sapnap laughs, leaning down to hug him again. “Thanks, Bad. Take care of everyone while I’m gone, okay? They’re gonna have breakdowns one after the other, I’ll bet.”

“I’ll do my best,” Bad promises. “Now, get. I don’t want you on the roads at night.”

Sapnap grins at him and then looks over at the others; Karl and Quackity are holding hands and George is leaning into Dream, Mellon in his arms. They all wave at him, even Mellon, and he waves back.

“Good luck,” he says to his parents. And then he gently nudges Patches’ sides and sets off for Pandora.

The night Sapnap leaves is unproductive. After they relinquish Mellie into Bad and Skeppy’s capable hands for a sleepover with Eryn, Karl makes a lot of hot drinks while the four of them sit in the kitchen, taking comfort in each other with uneasy conversation. There are gaps where Sapnap would be; empty spaces where he would talk, a mismatched cup unfilled at the table.

“This sucks,” Quackity says after a while, holding his mug so tightly that his knuckles are white. “This really fucking sucks. Why did we do this to ourselves?”

“Depends on what you mean by *this*,” Dream adds, miserably. He can sympathize. Apart from a few horrible months, he and Sapnap had spent every day of their lives together. “The wedding or Sapnap leaving?”

“You know why he left,” George nudges him.

“I know,” Dream says, in a voice that conveys that knowing why doesn’t really help at all.

“He’ll be back,” Karl offers. “Nothing can keep him away for longer than he absolutely has to be.”

“We should have practiced,” Quackity grumbles. “A few nights here and there, rather than being stuck without him for two weeks.”

“And when you and Mellon snuck to wherever he was banished so you could spend the night, what would have happened then?” George asks brusquely. “Look. It’s happened. He’ll be back. We all need to stop worrying and focus on the pages and pages of chores he left us.”

“In the morning,” Karl says, draining his mug. Not one of them moves.

“Gods damn it,” Karl says, “we’re all useless. Come on, I’m making a royal decree. We’re sleeping in our room tonight.”

“Where else would you sleep?” Dream frowns but Karl waves him off, standing up abruptly.

“No, *we’re* sleeping in my room. You two, as well.”

“I don’t think-” George starts but Karl waves him to silence, too.

“None of us are getting any sleep tonight like this. Come on, it’ll be like we’re camping again. I’ll get a fire going and we can pretend it’s Sapnap making the tent too hot.”

George looks ready to keep arguing but the stress of the day must be settling in because he gives up without another word. Instead, he takes one last gulp of his drink and stands up, tugging at Quackity and Dream.

The four of them make it to the bedroom, somehow. There’s no awkwardness or hesitation. It’s not the first time that Dream or George have been in their bed; the five of them end up switching out pretty often, depending on nightmares and Mellon and which bed was closest at the time of peak exhaustion. Tonight, Dream and George curl up close on one side of the bed and Quackity and Karl curl up on the other, Karl’s back pressed to Dream’s. While the bed is bigger than the rest in the house, they’re still four grown men and there’s little room left over. They forgo the fire, despite Karl’s offers.

Karl is the last of them to sleep. He listens to Quackity’s quiet snoring, feels the subtle shift as Dream relaxes in sleep - and there’s no sighs from George, which tells Karl that he’s finally drifted off, too.

Karl takes the time to compartmentalize. He just needs a minute of quiet to get his head in order. He lays in the dark, gently trailing his fingers along the bare curve of Quackity’s spine, familiar sigils taking shape under his touch, and thinks. He thinks about Sapnap, hopefully camping out in a safe place, and he thinks of the list of things that they have to do in the coming weeks. He thinks about Mellon and how this will be her first experience away from any of them, and about Dream and George, and the obvious anxiety Dream has been under

since they announced that they were ready. He thinks about Quackity and about the last time Sapnap had thought about making a journey without them and the old fear that still lingers in Karl that he won't be enough while Sapnap is gone.

He thinks about each of these things and then he carefully boxes them up and sets them on the right mental shelf to be shuffled around and forgotten once again. And then he kisses Quackity's forehead and goes to sleep.

"You triple-checked the cake, right?" Quackity frowns at him over their list, which has accumulated enough check marks and crossed-out items over the last two weeks to be close to illegible,. "That's the first thing he's going to ask about."

"If the cake is the first thing he asks about, then we're going to have a problem." Karl smiles. "Yes, I triple-checked the cake! I went down to the baker yesterday. It's almost done, they've got all the colors mixed perfectly and I left the stasis charm with them. It'll be delivered a few days before the ceremony, charm in place."

"And the decorations?"

"Just delivered a few hours ago." Karl gently takes Quackity's hands and squeezes them. "We've got this. Sapnap is gonna be blown away and I won't even have to get on my knees for it--"

"Karl!"

"What?" Karl laughs, lifting an arm to fend off Quackity's smack. "I'm right!"

"You're never one to complain about being on your knees," Quackity snarks, which makes Karl laugh harder, catching his flailing hands and bringing them to his lips for a few pecks to his knuckles.

"You're correct, my heart," Karl says against Quackity's fingers, "I'd spend my life servicing you both, if only we had the time for such debauchery."

"With an offer like that, I'd make time." Quackity's face relaxes into a small grin. There are soft bruises under his eyes, hints of bad sleep. Karl can relate. Even snuggled together, the bed is too cold, especially on the nights that Dream and George don't join them. Mellon has been sleeping with Eryn these last two weeks, content to spend her nights with her seldom-seen uncle, and Karl has long stopped feeling guilty for the relief that it's brought. At least they haven't had to pretend that they aren't miserable without Sapnap when they're faced so intimately with his absence.

Karl reaches up, traces his thumb under Quackity's eye and rests his palm on his cheek. Quackity turns his face, nuzzles into the crease of his fingers, presses a feather-soft kiss to the skin under his lips.

"Don't tempt me." Karl swallows dryly, palm tingling. "You're a siren, my love. I'm helpless."

“Yeah?” Quackity’s smile spreads and Karl feels it in his hand, the closest he’d ever get to holding Quackity’s happiness like a physical thing. It’s like little shots of electricity that start in his fingers and make their way down into his core. Karl only barely keeps his breathing steady.

“Only speak the words and I’d dash my ship across those sharp rocks. Drag me below your waves, drown me, rip my flesh to sunder and I’ll object not a word.” Karl can’t help himself - he leans forward and kisses Quackity, light and gentle. “I’d beg for the chance, bespelled as I am.”

“Do tell,” Quackity teases, reaching up to tug at Karl’s collar, “I’d never say no to begging.”

“And I’d never deny you,” Karl kisses him again and says, “Please.”

“Stop working me up,” Quackity whispers in the breath between their lips, making no move to pull away.

“Please,” Karl repeats and is rewarded with yet another kiss.

“Who’s the siren here, exactly?” Quackity complains, amusement plain. “We were talking about cake.”

“I’ve checked the cake.” Karl leans forward, pressing their foreheads together, and he feels the building tension dissipate and shift into something softer, something less charged.

“Triple-checked. It’ll be enough to feed every single guest twice over.”

“Good.” Quackity clears his throat, pressing a hand to the back of Karl’s before dropping them both to tangle casually between them. “What’s next?”

“Next, we go through the decorations and organize where they need to be put up.” Karl lets himself bask for just a moment longer and then straightens and looks around.

Since Sapnap’s departure, they’ve been at work on his list and on keeping Mellie from missing her dad too much. They’ve only really managed to make progress on one of those fronts, but having Eryn and her grandparents around to distract her has undoubtedly helped. Dream and George are a different story - if Karl and Quackity have missed Sapnap, then Dream and George act as if they’ve each lost an arm. Karl can’t blame them - he’d known even upon meeting Sapnap and George that they were inseparable and adding Dream to the mix was no different. The only positive about the situation is that Dream has been hard at work on the gazebo - there’s only the roof to shingle and details to carve in and the orchard will be ready for a wedding.

It’s been a stressful few weeks, to say the least. But for now, in this stolen moment, it is nice out as they stroll Quackity’s garden - flourishing with summer’s crop, bright peppers and juicy tomatoes, herbs and greens bursting from the rich soil, ready to be plucked. The sun shines but the air is damp with an upcoming summer storm - Karl hopes it won’t delay Sapnap’s return too much.

“If everyone arrives on schedule, we’ll have Sapnap, Puffy, and Foolish tonight,” Quackity says to himself, leading Karl through the little garden at a slow pace. Two birds fly overhead, twittering around each other, their jewel-toned feathers reflecting the sunlight as they fly together, and Karl watches them fondly. He’s pretty sure they’ve built a nest in the lemon tree.

“We’ll make Foolish help us with the heavy stuff,” Karl decides. “He’s always game for that sort of thing.”

“Oh, for sure,” Quackity agrees, “and Puffy will probably agree to help Bad and Skeppy with the centerpieces for the tables. Then I can bow out of that bullshit.”

Karl laughs, nodding. The centerpieces were Bad’s idea - an homage to Kinoko tradition regarding a monarch’s wedding. They won’t be making too many - just three - but each one is a delicate array of spun purple glass, golden threading, and various gems that only see the light of day for weddings. Karl knows Bad borrowed them directly from Kinoko’s coffers for the event and he knows George had allowed it without protest, and that’s good enough for Karl to go along with it. He just doesn’t want to be one of the poor souls threading a gold line through delicate glass and gemstones.

“Per Punz’s last letter, the knights are set to be here two days before the ceremony and Jimmy and the guys are tagging along with them, so they’ll bunk up in the guest quarters for a couple nights and we’re good to go for the actual ceremony,” Karl says. He’s said it before, three times now, and he’s sure he’ll say it again to appease nerves in the coming days, but he doesn’t mind.

“No news from the kids,” Quackity says after a moment of quiet, “so they might show up whenever.”

“Oh, goodie.” Karl wrinkles his nose. “Hopefully they shed the dead weight before they get here.”

“Karl,” Quackity chastises, but it’s with a laugh, and Karl doesn’t feel bad. He doesn’t say what he wants to say about Wilbur in front of Watermelon and that’s all any of them can ask of him.

“A boy can dream, can’t he?” Karl pauses to check a particularly nice cucumber over. He plucks it and slips it into a pocket for a snack later.

“Play nice. He only visits so often.”

“I know, I know,” Karl gives in, “I’ll play nice, as long as he doesn’t start anything. No promises if he opens that fat mouth of his, though.”

“I wouldn’t ask that of you,” Quackity says magnanimously. “At that point, it’s deserved. Now, as nice as the gardens are, we need to get started on those decorations before someone takes the initiative and fucks it all up.”

“Alright, alright.” Karl tugs Quackity closer, draping his arm over his shoulders and letting his fingers dance along the curve of Quackity’s wing, feathers petal-soft. “Do you think we have time for me to show you my favorite corner of the garden?”

He feels Quackity shiver, sees the gentle flush that stains his cheeks as he glances at Karl from the corner of his eye.

“We have a few minutes, probably.” Quackity clears his throat. “For a quick look around, I think.”

“I’ll make it fast.” Karl smirks, leaning in to press his nose to Quackity’s jaw and whisper a kiss to his cheek. And then he takes off, dragging Quackity quickly along behind him, for a private moment between the two of them in the shade of the garden.

One of the first things Bad had done upon arriving at the mansion was go up to the attic and retrieve a set of chairs so fancy that they were nearly thrones in their own right. Four in all, they stand with high backs made of rich dark oak and plush red cushions for comfort. The arms curl down, forming the front legs, with sturdy back legs and an intricate design carved into every available wooden surface.

Karl had been confused, though impressed by the craftsmanship, until he’d watched Bad mark four spots on the pre-made seating chart right in front of where Dream and George were set to stand.

“For those that can’t be here.” Skeppy had said quietly as George and Dream had both watched silently, and Karl had realized that these fancy seats were for parents that wouldn’t be making it to the ceremony. The chairs had been covered with a sheet to keep them safe and sat against the wall in the living room, and that’s where they still rest as Karl and his family - minus one very important member - sit around the table for dinner.

The plan had been for Sapnap to be back by sundown but, as predicted, the sky had opened up in a deluge. It’s been raining since mid-afternoon.

“Come on, Watermelon,” Karl tries to tempt Mellon with a piece of carefully-cut mutton, but Mellon refuses to open her mouth. Instead, she huffs, smoke coiling from her nostrils, thankfully particle-free despite her oncoming tantrum. She’s refused to eat since this morning, upset that Sapnap isn’t back yet and ready to make it known. She’s been surprisingly patient but she’s still just a toddler and she misses her dad.

“Just a few bites,” Karl wheedles, tickling at her scaly sides, but Mellon just huffs again and turns her face away. She makes a loud, whining noise, and Karl gives up, settling his arms around her in his lap and cuddling her closer to his chest. “I know, I know. But it’s raining! He had to stay in town to avoid getting wet. He’ll be home as soon as he can.”

“You have to eat so you can get big and strong!” Dream reaches across the table, a slice of meat from his own plate on the end of his fork, which he offers to Mellon. “How are you gonna tackle Sapnap to the ground if you’re not strong enough, hm? You’re almost big enough to wrestle him and win, Mels.”

Mellon makes another grumbling sound, glaring balefully at Dream, but she reluctantly opens her mouth when he gestures with the mutton and eats the slice with a loud gulp. Dream looks relieved, which makes Karl feel bad. She's been picking up on all of their moods, but Dream is hiding it at least, and it's affecting her, which is affecting him - a cycle that Dream is obviously trying to break with food.

"There we go," George praises her, "wasn't that good? Your grandparents spent a long time making it special, just for you and Eryn."

"It's really good!" Eryn agrees, perhaps a little too enthusiastically for how part of his mashed potatoes goes flying off his fork. He's got enough still in his other hand to make a meal, at least.

"See?" Quackity reaches over and pats Mellon's head, running his hand down her relaxed spine quills. "Eryn's gonna eat it all and then when you're hungry, there will be none left. You'd better eat your plate up before he gets to it!"

Eryn squeaks out a loud giggle as Skeppy tickles him, catching Mellie's attention, and Karl takes the opportunity to feed her distracted bites while she focuses on her uncle instead of her upset. Sometimes getting her to eat enough is a team effort and Karl is, once again, grateful that he's raising this dragon daughter of his with four other people and a good set of grandparents. It takes a village, indeed.

Through the shuttered window, Karl hears a soft roll of thunder. He tries not to worry. Sapnap is older and wiser than he was seven years ago. He knows that they're all safe and waiting for him patiently. He has two other people with him who won't let him make any unwise decisions just to get home faster.

He'll be home soon, once the storm is over.

"It's a good thing we didn't set up early," Bad says into the somber quiet, pitching his voice loudly enough that it's obvious he is expecting a response.

"Yeah." Dream clears his throat, shaking himself out of his quiet funk and looking up from his plate. George takes another slow bite. One of his hands is under the table, most likely on Dream's knee (at least, Karl *hopes* it's his knee). "It would have sucked if we'd set the chairs out already."

"How's the gazebo going?" Skeppy asks, and Dream shifts his focus from Bad to Skeppy, smiling weakly. Karl exchanges a worried glance with George. Karl hopes Sapnap is home soon for a wide range of reasons.

"It's coming along." Dream shrugs. "The next few days will be shingles. I was gonna have Sap help with it when he's back."

"He'll be delighted," Bad encourages. "And then it's done?"

"Some sketching on the rails." Dream motions with his knife, a swirl of a shape familiar to Karl, though he can't place it. "Then it's done."

“I could help.” Bad extends a hand, the tips of his claws obvious in the dim light of the candles. “These things are good for wood, too.”

“Thank you.” Dream smiles a little wider, bemused. “Q and I came up with a design.”

“It’s cool,” Quackity says around a bite of potatoes, “it’ll look really good when it’s all done. Our yard is going to be the destination wedding spot of the whole country after this.”

“They wish,” George scoffs. “We’re the only ones getting married here until we’re all in the ground.”

Skeppy knocks hard on the table, “Don’t even curse yourself like that, George! You’ve scared me out of my skin enough for one life, I think.”

George cackles, ducking behind Dream’s shoulder as Skeppy throws a bread roll at him - it bounces off and ends up in front of Karl, who doesn’t mind plucking it from the table and tearing it into pieces to sop up the gravy on his mutton.

They talk. The candle continues to wane. The food is cleared away. The rain continues to pour. Eryn yawns, eyes drooping. Mellon slips across the table and lays her head on George’s shoulder, tilting her face so it’s pressed to his jaw, and George cradles her until Karl sees her wings go lax as she sleeps. None of them are willing to retire, though they all know, as the night grows deeper and the rain grows harder, that there will be no excited knocking at the door to be let in and out of the downpour.

Sapnap is late. By not even a handful of hours. But Karl can’t help the bubbling anxiety. He’s done his best to hold out, to not worry, but it’s been hard. And it’s harder still now, with the way Dream’s gaze drifts to the shuttered windows between conversations.

Quackity threads their fingers together and squeezes.

“We should go to sleep.” Quackity says, when conversation has finally died and both kids are snoring quietly in distracted laps.

“Just a little longer.” George is the one to utter the words, so none of them complain. Skeppy brings out a new candle.

It’s well after midnight when Dream’s face finally drops and his shoulders slump.

“He’ll be here,” Karl says before Dream can open his mouth.

“What if he’s late?” Dream insists. “What if something’s happened?”

“It’s the rain.” Quackity stands and starts collecting glasses - Dream’s is empty, but the tinged-pink pool at the bottom and the mostly-empty wine bottle give Dream’s state away.

“He’s-” Dream breathes in shallowly, voice audibly catching. “He was supposed to be home tonight.”

“Dream, it’s *impossible* for him to be late.” George carefully manhandles Mellon into a more comfortable position, cradling her in his arms as he stands up. “We aren’t getting married until he gets here. Simple as that. I don’t care if we have the entire kingdom coming, it’s not happening until Sappnap is here.”

That, at least, seems to bring Dream back from the edge. He takes a deep breath and slowly stands up.

“I’m going to go to bed,” he says.

“I think that’s a good idea.” Bad stands, too, and comes around the table to scoop Mellon into his arms. Skeppy comes around the other side of the table, directly to Dream, and Dream accepts a tight hug. Skeppy is much smaller than him, but Dream doesn’t seem to mind hunching so he can hide his face.

Karl can’t make out what Skeppy says but he hears a whisper, sees hands squeeze Dream’s back and Dream’s shoulders come up to his ears before going looser.

When they break apart, George is there to pull Dream close so he can tuck himself into his side.

“Snap to it, everyone,” George sniffs. “We’ve got things to do tomorrow so get some rest.”

Karl stays to help clean the glasses with Quackity and they stand at the kitchen sink together. Quackity washes and Karl dries and puts each delicate goblet away. The silence is comfortable, if mellow and sad.

“He’s coming home.” Quackity says into the quiet. “Of course he is.”

“Of course he is.” Karl agrees, putting the last glass away. They do one more wipe down of the table without words and clasp hands before retiring for the night. There’s a cold spot in their bed and neither of them can bring themselves to stoke a fire to fill it.

Like most mornings after a storm, the next day dawns clean and fresh, the sodden grass sparkling in the sun and the smell of damp wood rising from Dream’s gazebo. It feels like the world has been born anew from the downpour overnight, and despite his worries, it brings a smile to Quackity’s face. The last of the bad weather has passed, and there are only blue skies predicted from now until the day of the wedding. He’s looking forward to spending time with Sappnap in the gardens again, with all of their stresses just out of sight over the garden wall.

He hopes Sappnap gets here soon. Mellie expected him to be home the moment her eyes opened, and it’s taken a combination of Karl, Bad and Skeppy, plus Eryn as an unknowing distraction, to pull her away from the same brewing tantrum as the previous night. Even so, he knows that she won’t be distracted for long. She’s too much like any one of her dads; bullheaded.

Sappnap is stubborn enough to get home in one piece and Quackity knows it, though. They’ve all just got to weather this particular storm until he breezes in with whatever excuses kept

him from his family.

They make it to mid-day without much incident; Dream goes hard at work on the shingles, a one-man work force, and Karl and George disappear to the village when they receive word that Mister Nook, who'd taken commission to cook all the food for the wedding, had fallen ill and his wife would need some help with a few things. It leaves Quackity to settle down with his in-laws to thread centerpieces while Eryn and Mellie chase each other under the table and around the room, which Quackity doesn't mind. As much as he adores his husband and best friends, the gloom of all four of them together has only made it harder to keep Mellie from having a meltdown.

They're eating a late lunch of hastily-made sandwiches and chit-chatting about how many centerpieces they truly need to make - even Bad's patience beginning to wear thin at the delicate work with two high-energy toddlers in their midst - when there is a knock at the door that sends Quackity's heart racing.

He knows it's not Sapnap the moment after the knock registers - Sapnap would never *knock* at the door of his own home. But, for just a moment, the hope was there, and it was lit in more hearts than just his.

Mellie goes zooming from the room with a deep cry of excitement that echoes with the budding power of an enderdragon, loud enough that it makes all of them flinch. That gives Eryn plenty of time to take off after her with a squeal of his own.

"Oh, dear," Bad says, "who could that be?"

"I have an idea." Quackity sighs, disappointment and worry warring, but a thin drip of good cheer finding its way somewhere in the mix, too.

He hurries after the kids, and finds them just as they figure out how to twist the handle of one of the heavy front doors open. It swings with a quiet creak and reveals familiar faces, though older than when he last saw them.

"*Big Q!*" Tommy shouts, throwing his arms out wide and nearly smacking Tubbo if he'd only been a moment later in ducking out of the way.

"Well, if it isn't the big man, himself." Quackity finds himself smiling despite his disappointment, lips pulling back in a grin to match the thousand-sun beam being aimed in his direction. "I barely recognize you!"

He isn't just saying that, either. The years show on them, these kids-turned-men on his doorstep. Gone is the lanky teenager that Tommy had been, all windmilling arms and legs, and instead is a young man, grown to fit his own skin and more besides.

"I didn't think you could *get* any taller," Quackity jokes. "Leave some height for the rest of us mortals."

"Not my fault everyone is short as shit," Tommy says, and promptly demonstrates that by exaggerating his lean down to give Quackity a hug. Quackity can't help but laugh as he hugs

back, feels the space where Tommy has bulked out as he's grown up.

They're grown. It's a funny concept to think about as he pulls back from Tommy to look at the others as the men they now are, rather than the teenagers he remembers. Tubbo hasn't gotten much taller but he looks more solemn than when last they met, a slight pinch to his eyes that speaks of late nights and stress. There are new scars - what looks like a wicked burn that starts at his jaw and bleeds down his throat, now healed but shifting the tone of his skin into scar tissue. His hair is curlier and longer, now pinned behind his horns. But he still smiles the same, wide and toothy, and his shoulders relax when Quackity holds out his arms and he falls into an awkward one-armed hug with no less warmth than Tommy's.

Ranboo, though he doesn't go for a hug, is different too. He isn't taller, thank all the gods, but he *seems* taller. He holds his shoulders back, spine straighter, a level of self assuredness that he'd never had when Quackity had seen him more regularly. He has new scars, too - thin lines that slide down his cheeks - also healed, but worrisome nonetheless. Still, he waves with the same awkwardness, all lanky limbs and floppy hair.

Five years has changed them, and obviously not in only the best ways. But they're standing in front of him, different and yet the same, with hints of the immaturity of youth that he picks up on the longer he watches them. The way Ranboo shifts on his feet; Tubbo's hands stuffed in his pockets, Tommy's stumble as he leans too far back when he laughs.

"It's good to see you three," Quackity says, and he means it, even if he wishes it had been someone else at the door.

"Well, we were invited. And we wanted to see exactly where you've been hiding yourself all these years, Big Q!" Tubbo rocks back on his heels and then forward onto his toes, casting his eyes around the entry hall with an appreciative hum. "Swanky."

"The letters really don't do it justice," Ranboo says. "This place feels bigger than the Snowchester palace."

"Once you've walked around a few times, it doesn't feel so huge." Quackity shrugs, but he's pleased. This is his home, after all - a gift from his in-laws that he and the people he loves most in the world have slowly built back into a real home over the last near-decade. He *is* proud of it, and he preens under their compliments despite himself.

"You've done a good job." A new voice cuts in - expected, with these three boys in front of him, and even welcome, though unwanted all the same.

"Wilbur." Quackity feels his smile shrink, but it stays, at least. "You made it."

"Well, I saw the scrap of paper with my name on it that made it into the invitation." Wilbur steps around the boys and Quackity takes a moment to look him over. Wilbur looks the very same as the last time Quackity saw him; he hasn't grown any older at all. Still fresh-faced, his hair artfully messy, a familiar smirk on his lips.

"George must have snuck it in before it hit the post," Quackity says, only half joking.

“This is nice ‘nd all.” A muscled arm falls over Wilbur’s shoulder, thick red cloak drifting over Wilbur’s slimmer frame, as his brother takes control of the conversation. “But where’s my girl, huh? Nice to see you, Quackity, but my niece isn’t in my arms and that is a *crime*.”

“Technoblade.” Quackity nods a greeting. He’s proud - there is only the faintest tinge of discomfort at the sight of Techno, where once it had been a full-blown meltdown.

To be fair, he’d seen the two of them only a handful of months ago, when they’d come to visit Mellon. They visit every quarter - four times a year - sometimes only a few days and sometimes up to a week, to spend time with her. And Quackity can’t begrudge them that, though he often spent those visits endlessly busy in the little village with this or that.

It’s like exposure therapy! And it’s worked, because here Quackity stands - unafraid of the piglin or the man he calls his twin.

Quackity casts his eyes around, realizing that he’s not heard a peep from either of his charges since the door had opened. He finds them in seconds, hiding behind one of Dream’s potted plants.

Despite her rambunctious personality, Mellon can be shy. The first time she’d met Wilbur, just after her first birthday, he’d not even been able to touch her for how unwilling she was to leave Sapnap’s shirt. It had taken endless coaching, promises of safety and treats, and - finally - George bodily lifting her into his lap and dragging Wilbur to sit next to him until she’d been willing to give him the time of day. Of course, she’d warmed as quickly to him as could be - but the initial meeting had been bumpy.

This time, at least, she has Eryn - who is not shy in the slightest.

“Well, what’s all this then?” Eryn says suspiciously from behind a giant, waxy leaf that would have obscured his face if not for how he was crushing it in his fist - and oh, Quackity did not look forward to when Dream noticed that. Mellon has curled her way around Eryn and casts suspicious eyes on the three strangers in her doorway, having probably opened the door expecting Sapnap. When she spots Wilbur and Techno, her spines settle back along her scales, but she still huffs a slow-rising cloud of smoke in malcontent.

Quackity finds himself laughing behind a hand, trying not to show his amusement too plainly as the trio of young men turn to see both children hiding and glaring. “Mellon, why are you hiding? Come meet your uncles. Eryn, these are some friends of ours, and Mellon’s uncles.”

“I’m a grandfather.” The last expected voice intones as Philza makes his way inside, his great wings tucked in close. “And I come bearing gifts.”

Mellon’s head rises up so she, too, can peek over the leaf.

Eryn blinks, his body language changing entirely as he spots Philza.

“*Birdman!*” He shrieks and bolts forward - dragging Mellon with him with a squawk of outrage.

Philza laughs, dropping down in time to catch both of them and sweep them into a hug. He easily untangles them, even as Eryn attempts valiantly to fight his way onto Phil's shoulders, and Mellon seems content to huddle against his chest and continue to cast unimpressed looks at Tommy, Tubbo, and Ranboo.

"Ah, if it isn't my favorite fire demon," Philza says fondly. "And my fierce little guardian. Hello, love."

Mellon bleats at him. Quackity is almost overcome with fondness, watching as she settles into her grandfather's arms.

"I didn't know you was coming!" Eryn throws his arms around Phil's head and hugs his face, mussing his hat, much to Quackity's amusement.

"We heard there was a wedding." Phil laughs, sounding not too annoyed at all by the hugging.

"Yeah, Dream and George are gonna kiss and stuff," Eryn explains succinctly.

"That's not too far off," Quackity says with a shrug as Wilbur finds his way to Phil's side.

Quackity won't ever be able to say that he's *thrilled* about the fact that his daughter is soul-bonded to Wilbur Soot, but he can admit that it is sweet to see when they reunite. Mellon willfully unclings from Philza and spreads her little wings wide so Wilbur can lift her from Phil's arms and into his own.

Quackity turns away to give them their moment. Instead, he focuses on the faces of the boys - Tommy looks nearly purple from how hard he's holding himself back from jumping forward to snatch his niece from Wilbur, while Tubbo appears mostly unconcerned except for how hard he's rocking on his feet, and Ranboo looks a little bit terrified. Technoblade is watching over all of them with his arms crossed, looking smug and fond in equal measure.

"Come along, friend," Wilbur says, "it's time you met your uncles, ay? They've been waiting very patiently for this. No, no," Wilbur scoffs, using that tone that Quackity has really only ever heard him use with Mellon. "Don't be silly. They love you already."

The next few minutes are filled with Mellon and Eryn being introduced to Tommy, Tubbo, and Ranboo. Eryn is already familiar with Phil and Technoblade from his time in Kinoko, and he is fast friends with them in no time. Mellon takes a bit longer to warm up, but is soon using Ranboo and Technoblade as launching pads for Tommy to catch her in mid-air while Tubbo cheers her on.

It's not long after that they're joined by the others; no doubt having cleaned up lunch to prepare for guests at Bad's urging.

"Philza!" Bad is the one to call out, catching Quackity's attention; he turns to see his family emerging all together, Skeppy and Bad in the lead but Karl hot on their heels, with George and Dream following more sedately after them.

“Bad.” Phil grins. “I knew you were around here somewhere.”

“Eryn!” Skeppy tries to sound firm, but the laughter is so obvious in his voice that he mostly just sounds amused. “Get off of Mister Philza. He isn’t a climbing toy.”

“Come and get me!” Eryn sticks his tongue out at his dad, and then shrieks with laughter when Philza plucks him from his shoulders and holds him out for Skeppy to snatch and begin to tickle.

“Dream!” Tommy, to the surprise of no one, is quick to realize that Dream is in the crowd that’s just joined them, and in his distraction he nearly misses Mellon when she leaps from Techno. He saves her at the last second, much to Quackity’s panic, but she doesn’t seem bothered and quickly uses Tommy’s lanky arms as an opportunity to launch herself back toward Dream, who darts forward in time to catch her.

“Mellon!” Dream tries to admonish, “We talked about this. Eye contact before you throw yourself off high places! I could have missed you!”

“You wouldn’t have missed her.” George rolls his eyes, smile breaking through. “You’ve never dropped her once.”

“That isn’t the point,” Dream grumbles, but he seems pleased as Mellon finds her way to his shoulders and collapses like a scarf, her little sides rising and falling rapidly as she comes down from the adrenaline of new people and playing.

Dream continues toward Tommy, though, reaching out a hand that Tommy clasps and shakes excitedly.

“Ello, Dream!” Tommy grins. “Long time no see! Congratulations ‘n’ all that, I heard you and the Gogs-meister are tyin’ the knot! It’s been quite the wait, I’ll say, I honestly thought you’d had the ol’ *nuptials* way back in the day! Can’t say I’m disappointed, nows that it means I can be here an’ can I just say, am I *delighted* -”

“Hello, Tommy,” Dream interrupts Tommy’s speech, laughing quietly. It’s good to see and hear, after the last few weeks of Dream’s steadily declining mood and increased stress. “I’m glad you guys could make it.”

“Where’s Sapnap?” Tubbo asks. He and Karl are still shaking hands and Tubbo peers around him, as if Sapnap might be hiding, looking disappointed. “I wanted to show him my new axe.”

Quackity feels his own good mood lower.

George is the one to answer after a slight pause. “He went to escort Puffy and Foolish from Pandora. He’s due back any day now, actually.”

“Oh, man.” Phil winces. “When did he leave? Hopefully they made it out before the walls closed.”

“...The walls what?” Skeppy turns sharply from where he’d been holding Eryn up so he could feel Techno’s tusks. Techno’s arm swiftly slides under Eryn’s little body to support him as Skeppy drops his arms. Quackity feels the tension ratchet up his spine.

“The walls.” Phil hesitates. “Did you not hear about the tsunami?”

“*Tsunami?*” Bad balks and then clears his throat, “I - I mean, no. What tsunami?”

“There was a minor tsunami that overtook the Skeleton Estuary about three weeks ago.” Wilbur is, of course, the one to answer. “It hit the ports pretty hard. They’ve closed the city walls while they’re rebuilding, for security purposes.”

Dream turns to stare at George. Dream’s face might be carefully blank, but Quackity has had years now to learn to read his eyes, and he sees the rapidly growing panic. Dream’s hand comes up to hold Mellon in place, more comforting to himself than her.

“Of course they made it out before then,” George says after a brief pause. “There’s no way Puffy and Foolish just sat and waited at the docks for him. They would have left Pandora the day they docked and met him on the road.”

It’s logical. It makes sense. Quackity tries very, very hard to believe it.

Dream blinks hard a few times in quick succession and nods once.

“Dream!” And then, thankfully, Karl is there, whisking Mellon from Dream’s shoulders and depositing her in Quackity’s arms before he wraps his hand around Dream’s and starts to tug. “I just remembered, Skeppy and I were going to show you how to make the centerpiece for the groom’s table! It’s a bit more complex, we need extra hands.”

“Yeah,” Skeppy pops himself in the forehead lightly, “I totally forgot! Come on, that’s going to take hours. We can start now and have it done by tonight, if we’re lucky.”

“But-” Dream starts to protest, and then the fight leaves him and he nods. “Okay.”

Karl doesn’t let the quiet tone bring him down. He sends Quackity a sparkling grin and a wink and then he and Skeppy are both dragging Dream from the room and back toward the kitchen.

When Dream is gone, Quackity watches George transform from casual to strict - his back straightens, his shoulders broaden, his face grows serious and his eyes firm.

“I’m so glad you could all make it,” he says, “You’ve come five days early, which I can only assume means that you’re here to offer your services in making this the smoothest, most perfect wedding any of you have ever attended. Is that correct?”

Something in his voice must give away the only correct answer, because Quackity finds all six of their new guests nodding without a word.

“Perfect.” George smiles grimly. “This is going to be Dream’s dream wedding. We are going to craft it *exactly* as planned. I want no whining, no fighting, no bickering, no heartbreaks or

drama, *none* of it.” As he lists, he holds up a finger for each word. “Nothing is going to go wrong. When Dream is around, you are to *only* talk about how well this is going to go and how Sapnap is going to make it in time. If there is any problem, you go to Quackity or Karl or me, and we’ll fix it. This is going to be perfect, or so help me Prime.”

He doesn’t have to finish the threat. George is so rarely serious, and so rarely truly demanding in any way that isn’t simply to be dramatic, that it seems the implication alone is enough to make his point.

Tommy is the one to speak up. “You got it, George,” he says. “I promise, we’re here to help and we’ll be the best wedding planners you’ve ever had!”

“Yeah, this’ll go off without a hitch with us around!” Tubbo chimes in. “We’re the best at events, trust me.”

“Good.” George breathes out and the tension slips from his shoulders again. “Now, Quackity knows what tasks still need to be done. I’ll be working on a seating chart if you need me.”

With that, George sweeps out of the room in the direction that Karl and Skeppy had dragged Dream.

“...Well.” Wilbur blinks after him. “Bit of a groomzilla situation we have here.”

“No.” Quackity hugs Mellon close. “Just a lot of expectations. And they’re going to be met.”

“For Dream!” Tommy says triumphantly. “And the king!”

“He’s abdicated. And he wasn’t even your king,” Ranboo points out.

“Shut up, Ranboo,” Tommy snarks, and Eryn gasps.

“Tommy said a bad word!” Eryn points at Tommy. “Daddy!”

“*Language*, Tommy,” Bad chastises immediately, and the tension is fully broken as Tommy starts to argue that *shut up* isn’t a bad word as Mellon wriggles out of Quackity’s arms to scamper to Wilbur’s.

Quackity takes the time to pull the to-do list out of his pocket and unfold it. George was right - there’s still plenty to get done. Now that he has twelve new hands on deck, he feels a bit better about things. They’ve got five days left, and that’s plenty of time to put it all together.

Sapnap’s familiar handwriting brings him comfort, even if he doesn’t yet have his husband back at his side.

He clears his throat to get their attention. “Alright, then. Let’s get jobs assigned.”

Mellie’s room is best described as a den. Pillows and blankets are scattered all over the floor, the majority of them stacked in a corner in a way that can only be described as haphazard. Quackity does his best to gather up the toys as he ushers the two children through their

bedtime routine, having offered since Skeppy and Bad were in the middle of a wedding errand. Eryn is still bouncing from wall to wall, eager to reenact all the excitement of the day, but Quackity can tell that Mellie isn't as eager to join in. She curls up in the corner of her bed, her toy enderman hanging from her claws, face shoved into the fluff. Eryn's burst of energy finally fades as Quackity finishes getting him in his pajamas, and he comes to lay down next to her as Quackity finishes cleaning up so he can at least see the floor he's walking on.

Eryn has his arms wrapped around her neck by the time Quackity sits down on the edge of the bed. He tucks Eryn under his blanket and Eryn snuggles in.

"Hey, Quack?" Eryn asks, his little voice softer than Quackity is used to him sounding. Quackity hums to show he's listening, straightening out Mellon's blanket and draping it over her, too.

"Sapnap is comin' back soon, right?"

Quackity blinks, and then finds himself clearing his throat. His eyes burn, just a little.

It's scary. It was scary when Sapnap left and it hasn't stopped being scary since he's been gone. Quackity knows in his gut that Sapnap is okay - that he's probably just stuck in the city, or on his way now, or a million other things. But Quackity still has nightmares about... everything, and they aren't rare. He doesn't want to think about those few seconds where he existed in a world without Sapnap. This separation is *hard*. But he has to keep in mind that it isn't just hard for *him*, or the others. It's hard for Eryn, who already sees his brother so rarely, and it's hard for Mellie, who's never gone without one of her parents before.

"Of course." Quackity says, trying to keep his voice steady.

He reaches out to run a hand down Mellie's scales, but she huffs and turns from him so that she completely faces away, hiding between her enderman and Eryn's chest.

"I know, guys," Quackity says, "I know. I miss him, too. But he'll be home in time for the party! I know he will."

Mellie grumbles, low in her throat, her displeasure obvious. Eryn shifts, eyes shining in the dim light of the room even as his lids start to fall under the weight of the day finally reaching him.

"I want him to be here with us as much as you two do," Quackity says, gently, and this time, Mellon doesn't shift away when he strokes down her back. "I know it sucks, baby girl. It really, really sucks. And everyone's super busy, right?" Another higher rumble, almost a whine.. "Yeah, I'm pretty sick of being busy too. I'd much rather stay with you guys and play."

She shuffles around, careful not to disturb Eryn, who has started to doze off with his face in her flank. She blinks her big purple eyes up at him, almost questioningly.

"What is it?"

Mellie blinks again, and hesitantly stretches out one of her wings. Leathery and the same dark onyx as the rest of her, they're more like bat wings than anything Quackity has seen on an avian, but it tugs at his heart all the same.

"I know, we haven't done much practice for a bit, have we? We'll go soon, baby girl, I promise."

She grumbles again, and he quickly amends, knowing she wants something more concrete than just a vague promise, "After Sapnap is home, and the wedding is done, then we'll all go together. It's a lot of fun to see all the new people, but sometimes it's nice to just be us, isn't it?"

"Can I glide?" Eryn asks, obviously mostly asleep. Quackity quirks a smile, brushing his bangs from his face and stroking under his eye until Eryn releases a heavy breath and his eyes fall totally shut.

"You don't have wings, rugrat. But I bet we can throw you around a bit, so it's kind of like you're flying."

"Good 'nough." Eryn mumbles happily, turning into Quackity's palm with a sleepy smile.

Mellie gives a specific chirp, a high *mrrp* that she only uses for one person.

"Yes, if he's good, Wilbur can come too." Quackity sighs, trying to hide the annoyance from his daughter. "I'm sure he'd love to see how good you've gotten at gliding since the last time."

She chirps again, this time a proud noise, and Quackity is glad he's been able to cheer her up somewhat, and that she didn't seem to notice his annoyance with Wilbur.

"You've been doing so good, Mels, and not just with your gliding. You've been so good while Sapnap has been gone and we're all really proud of you," Quackity says, softly, as he rubs a thumb over her snout, Mellie pressing her forehead to his. "Just be good for us a little while longer, and he'll be home before you know it."

Mellie chuffs, then, a quick exhale of breath in three sharp successions; the way she says "I love you."

Quackity chuckles, "Love you, too. And I love you, as well, Eryn. Sweet dreams."

Mellie sighs, and tucks herself around Eryn, who settles into sleep as easy as breathing, curled together in an absolute picture. Quackity wishes Sapnap was here, at least to just see this; best of friends, the fire demon and the Ender Dragon.

He presses one last kiss to her snout, and then to Eryn's forehead, right between his horns. And takes his leave.

He's only just closed the door when a voice speaks up behind him.

"You're pretty good at this."

“Lady *fucking* Prime, Wilbur!” Quackity hisses, only just about catching himself from shouting and turning it into a rough whisper, “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Can’t I come and pay you a compliment?” Wilbur asks, hands out and shrugging in that way that he does.

“Not when you’re skulking about in my hallways like you’re haunting the place,” Quackity grumbles. “What do you want?”

“Like I told you,” Wilbur says, surprisingly not rising to Quackity’s bait. “Coming to pay you a compliment. That’s all.”

Quackity frowns. “Mellon’s asleep. If you want to sweet talk me for a chat with her then-”

“Is it so hard to believe that I’m genuine?” Wilbur asks, but Quackity’s expression is clearly answer enough.

“I just wanted to say,” Wilbur starts, and then stops again, hands wringing together. “Quackity, she’s so good.”

“I’m aware,” Quackity says, dryly.

“No, I mean-” The veneer of his confidence has fallen away, and he only just meets Quackity’s eyes, gaze nervously flitting between him and the ceiling, “She’s *so good*. I can hear her, you know, in-” He taps the side of his head, and Quackity bites back a scowl. He can only bear so many reminders of how Wilbur’s life is so intertwined with his daughter’s before he snaps.

Quackity has to force himself to refocus on Wilbur’s words, and they’re almost desperate, as if he needs Quackity to know everything he’s about to say. “She’s so good, Quackity, she’s... she loves you *so much*. All of you. It’s all she really thinks about, at least to me.” Wilbur laughs, awkward, but his next words are completely serious, completely sincere. “She’s... she’s everything good, everything right about this world. I mean it, I do, she...she loves you, she loves the world, she even loves *me*, and I...” He trails off, still twisting his hands together. “You did such a good job with her. Better than I ever could have done. Maybe I would have denied that, once, but when I hear her, and I hear how she sees the world...you did a good job, Q. A really good job.”

“Wilbur,” Quackity says around the lump in his throat. “I...it wasn’t just me, you know.”

“I know,” Wilbur says, softly, “I know. But she’s yours. In every way that matters, and she’s... She really is something special. You’re doing a good job.”

“I need you to not erase them from this situation. If you want to recognize her parenting, it has to be all of us, not just me.”

“*Fine*, fine. If you’ll make me say it. The five of you are doing an amazing job. You and... Sapnap and Karl. George and Dream. You guys are doing better than I could have ever hoped for her.”

“Wow,” Quackity says, finally, after trying and failing twice to get the sentence out. “Yeah, that was...I don’t think I’ve ever heard you give a genuine compliment. Honestly, that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said about Sapnap or Karl.”

“Normally, someone just says thank you,” Wilbur says.

“Thank you,” Quackity says, magnanimously.

“You could at least say it like you mean it,” Wilbur scowls. “That was a lot for me to admit.”

“I do mean it,” Quackity says, “It’s...I never thought I’d be a parent, Wilbur. Much less to a dragon. Much less to *your* dragon. But I’m glad to be, with the people I’m parenting with and the daughter I have.”

“I’m glad you don’t hold that against her,” Wilbur says. “I know it must be hard to deal with-”

“*You’re* hard to deal with,” Quackity corrects. “Not her. Never her.”

“No.” Wilbur says, softly, “That’s one thing we can agree on.”

There is a long awkward silence, the two of them standing in the hallway outside Mellie’s bedroom.

“I’ll just -” Wilbur starts.

“Yes, you’d better,” Quackity says, dryly. “I can only have so much polite conversation with you and I’d like to save that for the times when we’re in front of Mellie.”

“Right,” Wilbur says, “of course. I...Thank you, Quackity. And...please give my thanks to your husbands, and to the soon-to-be newlyweds.”

Quackity sighs, but he means it when he says, even if he might regret it later, “Anytime, Wilbur.”

The first time they talk about getting married, they’ve ducked into the gardener’s tower, tucked into the farthest corner of the royal gardens. It’s a small space, lit only with a dim lantern that they’ll have to extinguish when they leave, full of dusty barrels and crates of seed and plant food. George is leaning up against burlap sacks filled with something that gives just slightly under his solid weight and Dream is nosing at his throat - not quite kissing, but his lips are brushing George’s skin as he talks, and it tickles and sends shivers down George’s spine. They’ve only been officially together for a handful of weeks, but George knows in his very core that there is no one he will ever love like he loves the man he holds now.

“I’ll wear my netherite,” Dream whispers, though he is not yet a knight and won’t be for at least another year. “And I’ll carry Nightmare. The whole kingdom will see me and know that you’re the safest monarch to ever rule Kinoko.”

“I’ll wear my plainest clothes,” George scoffs, though his voice quivers in a way that only Dream has ever managed to reduce him to. “And I’ll send the kingdom away. It’ll be you and I and Sapnap, and perhaps Bad to officiate. If my parents ask nicely, they’ll be allowed to sit in the back of the courthouse.”

“Okay,” Dream agrees immediately. “I’ll be naked, I’ll bear it all to you. I’ll carry a stick for a sword and kneel at your feet to pledge myself to you again.”

“You’ll wear clothes,” George laughs, “and you can keep your sword. There will be no kneeling. We’ll pledge ourselves to each other, idiot.”

Dream ducks his head, presses his face to George’s collarbone. He trembles. George holds him close, rubbing his back in soothing circles.

“I-” Dream swallows, breathing shallow. “George...”

“You’re such a baby.” George gently pulls Dream from his hiding spot to look at him. Dream’s eyes are big and wide and wet. George sees how Dream tries to steel his expression. It’s something George has always been so fond of; how hard Dream tries to be strong. How easily George is able to read him despite it.

“I’m not. I’ve just - I’ve been thinking about this for - for forever, I just - I have so much in my head about it, about you, about us, about-”

George shushes Dream, swiping a thumb under Dream’s eye to catch the glimmer of a tear before it can fall.

“Relax.” George encourages his knight to calm. “You’re going to give yourself a stroke, and then I’ll be a widower before I even get to marry you.”

“Yes, George.” Dream subsides, trying to duck his face again. George doesn’t let him, catching Dream by the chin and tilting his lips back up so George can steal them in another kiss.

“It will be perfect.” George says quietly. “I don’t care if it’s a royal wedding, or if we have it after we run away. I don’t care if it’s in the castle or a barn, if Bad officiates or if we whisper our vows for nobody but the gods and Sapnap to hear. I don’t care if we wear the finest clothes or if we both show up in sacks. I don’t care, Dream. As long as it’s us.”

“I want it to be the best.” Dream takes a shaky breath, exhaling against George’s lips in a sigh. “I want it to be perfect. I want to look back on it and for it to be - be everything we are.”

“It will be,” George promises, because in their entire lives together, Dream has never once asked anything of him like this. A request that *means* something to Dream.

George doesn’t deserve Dream’s loyalty. He knows that. He knows that he doesn’t deserve to be the center of Dream’s affections - that Dream is strong and loving and beautifully kind, that Dream is full of the wonders of the world. He knows that Dream is the sun, and George is a flower, dormant in the darkness and blooming under Dream’s smile when he has occasion

to direct it George's way. George knows that it is purely luck that brought him to the position that he now has - luck that he was conceived, luck that Dream was chosen to be his knight, luck that found Dream in the gardens that fateful sunrise when they were both foolish children, unaware of what the future had in store for them.

But George is going to try to become someone who deserves all of those things. Not because of his kingdom, or its people, or his parents - but because of the boy in front of him, who holds him like he is precious, who tears up at the thought of marrying him, who George has come to love and plans to spend the rest of his days with... George is going to become someone who deserves that boy.

When the day comes that they wed - because it *will* so long as George draws breath - when that day comes, George is going to make sure that it is exactly what Dream hopes it to be. The perfect day.

Now, with their family and their house in the Badlands and new scars, neither George nor Dream are boys anymore. But George hasn't forgotten Dream's request - still, to this day, one of the only things Dream has ever truly asked of him.

And it's for this reason that George is so stressed that he thinks he will soon begin to lose hair.

"What do you *mean* Mister Nook is sick?" George says, trying his best not to sound overly aggressive. He's never been one to shoot the messenger, unless the messenger was Sapnap or Dream. This messenger is simply a slightly cowering, late-adolescent enderman.

"He's got a pretty nasty fever," Ranboo says, relaxing when George doesn't launch himself at him over the news. "Misses Nook says that she'll have it all ready by tomorrow if you can get her some help, otherwise it'll be a day-of delivery."

"Okay." George takes a slow breath. This is fine. He'll handle it and Dream will simply not need to know. Easy. "How're your cooking skills, Ranboo?"

"Passable," Ranboo says carefully.

"And Tubbo's?"

"Slightly more passable."

"Then it's settled." George looks around the orchard, where a heavy few pairs of hands have been added to the mix. Late last night, another knock on the door had startled them all from a light dinner. Despite George's burning hope, it had not been their wayward fire demon and Dream's nautical family, but a small troop of half-retired knights and fully-operational sellswords come just in time to avoid being late and adding an additional stone of anxiety to George's ever-shifting balancing act.

With the knights of Kinoko and Karl's guild on deck, the entire wedding party had made their way to the mansion, barring three rather VIP members.

Currently, Quackity and Karl have everyone clearing the orchard of dropped fruitlings, wayward branches, weeds, and anything else deemed unacceptable for the aesthetic of the ceremony. Punz and Sam have climbed to the top of the freshly built gazebo to lay the roofing while Dream has been kept inside to help with finishing touches on the decorations for the tables and chairs. They'll be done within the next couple hours and will leave the tiles to settle overnight. A fresh coat of limewash will cover the whole thing tomorrow so it'll be dry by the day after, when the ceremony will take place.

Jimmy and a small posse of Beast Guild members have made a game of prettying up the trees, wrapping them in ribbon and stringing the hefty limbs with fairy lights, Karl in the lead and looking menacing as he makes Chris untie a bow and re-do it to perfection. George glides his eyes along all of his friends and loved ones - hard at work to make the day as good as it can get - and finds who he's looking for.

"Tubbo!" he calls, waving the goat hybrid over. Tubbo had been with Tommy, keeping Eryn and Mellie distracted, but he leaves the three of them with a wave of the hand, looking relieved as he scampers over.

"Thanks for the save, Bossman." Tubbo winces as he rolls his shoulder. "The reptile child's pretty feisty today. She *bit* me earlier!"

"It was a love bite," George dismisses, though he still motions for Tubbo to give him his hand, where pinpricks show along his palm. George frowns, making note to talk to Mellon about playing so rough. She's been steadily getting rowdier and rowdier over the past few days as Sapnap's continued absence grates on her. He knows the feeling; he's felt his own patience beginning to thin, too, without half of his heart around. Still, she can't be taking that out on other people.

"Sorry," he says after looking the bite over. "Are you okay?"

"Fine!" Tubbo waves him off, pulling his hand back with a shrug, "She's just a little'un, I've had worse!"

"Still," George frowns, "I'll talk with her. For now, can you and Ranboo go to the village to help Misses Nook out? She needs assistance with the food."

"Sure." Tubbo looks over at Ranboo, raising an eyebrow. "Think you can handle the heat of the kitchen?"

Ranboo scoffs, drawing himself up tall. "I think I'll be fine, actually."

Tubbo grins, a little bit feral, and George sends the two of them off with firm instructions for Tubbo to wear gloves over that bitten hand of his and for Ranboo to avoid any water. He takes a second to watch them go, and then turns around until he sees where Tommy has ended up with the kids. Tommy's got them corralled in a free space on the far side of the gazebo and he has them totally entranced in whatever story he's telling them that requires his arms flap like a bird. George begins to head over, intent on giving Mellon a stern lecture on playing too rough again - only to be distracted by someone calling his name.

“George!” Niki shouts, standing toward the mouth of the orchard and waving her hands to catch his attention. “The cake is here, George! Come give it a peek!”

George hesitates, but Tommy seems to have a handle on both Eryn and Mellon, and Karl is still in the garden to handle it if she gets out of hand. He can spare a minute to go look at the cake and make sure it’s perfect.

“Coming!” He turns away from the orchard and jogs over. Niki looks excited, and it fills George with hope that the village baker had delivered as promised.

He follows his friend back to the mansion kitchen, where Bad, Skeppy, Quackity, and Dream are already standing around the table.

George doesn’t actually care about the cake - his eyes go to Dream’s face as soon as he sees his fiancé in the kitchen. George feels his entire body heave a relieved sigh when he sees that, for the first time in weeks, Dream actually looks excited.

“George,” Dream turns to face him when he notices that they’ve arrived, his voice high in his happiness. “Come look!”

He offers a hand and George doesn’t hesitate to grab it, squeezing tight as he comes to join them at the table.

The cake is, indeed, gorgeous; the baker truly has outdone herself. It’s three tiers and about the size of Eryn, and towers from where it sits on the table. The base of the cake is covered in a bouquet of familiar flowers; George recognizes cornflowers, poppies, tulips, sunflowers, roses, and lavender. The flowers fade as they move up to the second tier, pink petals pressed into white icing and wayward roses finding purchase on the flare of the tier. The top tier is dedicated to cherry blossoms, which cover the top of the cake and cascade down the side, as if showering the petals down to the second layer.

It reminds George of the royal gardens, of walking through the blooms with Dream’s hand in his, sneaking kisses in the gardener’s tower, whispering plans of this day to each other where only the flowers could hear them.

George finds that his eyes are wet.

“Oh.” He clears his throat. “Wow. It’s...it’s great.”

“It’s perfect.” Dream leans into his side, tossing an arm over George’s shoulders and pressing his mouth to George’s temple. “It’s...wow.”

“It’s under a protective enchantment.” Quackity pats George’s back, bringing George back to awareness that other people exist outside of himself and Dream and the cake that represents such an important place for them. “To keep it all safe until the wedding.”

Quackity motions to a small token settled at the base of the cake - a carved wooden charm that shimmers with an obvious enchantment. George wants to touch, but is too scared to fuck

up the enchantment. He settles for holding Dream's hand tighter, their grips on each other crushing.

George takes another breath. The cake, and Dream's obvious joy in it, help him to shore himself back up. This is the joy he's been looking for, the joy he's been trying to achieve and protect. George doesn't care about what the cake looks like, or the garden, or the decorations - he only wants what will make Dream happy, and at this he's succeeded. Even through Dream's stress about Sapnap and Puffy, about all of the people at their house, about the wedding, about everything - he's smiling, which means George is doing his job. And that's enough for him to keep doing it until Sapnap finally gets his arse home with Dream's family in tow.

His newly bolstered determination that he is doing okay, that he is even perhaps *succeeding*, dwindles as the night sets in again and there is still no sight of Sapnap.

There are too many of them to host a proper dinner so they arrange more of a buffet style meal - Karl, Alyssa, Callahan, and Niki spend long hours in the kitchen making dinner and Punz, Chris, and Chandler help to lay it all out on the dining room table, along with dishware.

It's nice. It would be fun, even, if George weren't practically eating his nails in worry. Were he to be asked, George would bet his entire life that Sapnap will be back in time and he'd fight anyone who said otherwise. But internally, George is worried and stressed, and not only about the timing. Most of him is concerned that Sapnap has been hurt, because nothing else would keep him away this long.

Still, George keeps up the brave face, especially when Dream turns worried eyes his way. The night grows later and the din dies down as their friends begin to retire, and there is still no sight of their missing fifth.

When Mellon has her meltdown, at least most of their guests have gone to sleep, leaving only the four of them, Bad and Skeppy, and a dozing Wilbur - who wakes up immediately at her first growl - to experience it. George isn't surprised, even if he is selfishly frustrated. There were twenty some-odd strangers in her house, her dad has been missing for going on nearly a month with no word, she's not getting her usual level of attention despite their best efforts, and she is, for all intents and purposes, a toddler. She's a sweet girl and usually more patient than any of her parents by far, but even she has her limit, and this night is when she reaches it.

The growl is at Eryn, much to George's alarm. And Eryn immediately bursts into loud wails that only make Mellon's growling worse, though they quickly turn into bleats of distress as she, too, begins to cry, perhaps having scared herself.

Quackity is the closest to the two of them and whisks Eryn away from Mellon, out of range of her claws and lashing tail, which she tends to lose control of when she's having a tantrum. George finds himself moving on auto-pilot, firmly picking Mellon up from the floor and avoiding the whipping of her tail until she manages to curl it around his arm like a snake.

“Now, Mellon,” he mutters, walking out of the room to help separate the two feuding toddlers, “is this anyway to be behaving?”

She hisses at him, knocking her head into his jaw just shy of painfully. She’s getting to be too big for that. He’s suddenly reminded that he still needs to talk to her about biting Tubbo earlier.

“You’re fine.” He finds himself sitting on the floor, pulling her away from his chest to give her a firm look. “Stop those crocodile tears, ma’am, or I’ll start crying, too, and that will only embarrass us both.”

Mellon snaps at him again, but her bleating subsides into quiet huffs, her flanks rising and falling just a mite faster than usual. She settles into his grip, hanging from his hands with her tail still wrapped around his arm and her wings loose and limp behind her. Her spikes are raised, but they lower under his firm look.

“There.” He carefully settles her into his lap, “Now we can have a conversation.”

She huffs at him.

“Are you okay?” he asks, lifting her up again to exaggeratedly check her belly and sides. She wriggles, grumbling in malcontent, and shakes her head.

“Well, if you’re not hurt, then there is not a single reason I can think of that you would need to growl at Eryn.” George frowns at her. “That isn’t kind at all, Mellon. You scared him.”

Mellon hisses again, but she drops her face down and a small bleat escapes, her version of a sob.

“I know you’re frustrated.” George settles her back down again, cupping her face in his hands and smoothing her head-scales back carefully. “I get it. I am, too. But that’s no reason to be mean to your friends.”

She ducks her head again, wings drooping.

“Things are very chaotic right now.” George tries to stay firm, but gives up and sighs out the tension in his shoulders, slumping against the wall. “I know that there’s a lot happening. But do you think Sapnap would be very pleased if he saw you being mean to your uncle?”

Shamefully, Mellon swings her head back and forth again.

“No, he wouldn’t,” George says firmly. “And he wouldn’t be happy to hear about you biting people, either. Was that an okay thing to do to Tubbo, Mellon?”

She shakes her head again, bleating quietly. The sounds break his heart, but George is, unfortunately, the only one of them to ever be able to resist giving in to it. He has his mother to thank for that, he’s sure.

“You’re correct, it isn’t. You’re a big girl now. You have very sharp teeth and very sharp claws. Hurting people just because you’re upset isn’t okay.”

Mellon huffs, but it's not with annoyance this time. The apology finally softens George.

"I know," he says, "I'm sad, too. We're all sad. But when we're sad is when we need to be kindest to each other. Eryn misses Sapnap, too, you know. We all do."

She nods, grumbling. He gathers her into a hug and she presses her body against his, hiding her face in his jaw. He feels her nudge against the spot she'd hit earlier, another apology, and he strokes her back in acceptance.

"Now." He squeezes her close for a few seconds. "I think you owe Eryn an apology, young lady. I don't want to hear any more about you being too rough with anyone again, or we're going to have quite the talk, Mellon."

She nods against his chest, warm smoke drifting into his face and making his nose twitch with the urge to sneeze.

"Do you want to sit for a bit longer?" he offers, and she nods again. So George sits on the floor of the hallway with his daughter, holding her close, and tries not to think about his own parents and the similar conversations they'd had with him when he was young. Ever since Bad had pulled those chairs out, George had been doing his best to avoid all of the quiet memories of his own parents bubbling up.

He finds himself wondering if they'd have recognized Mellon as his or not. If they'd have left Kinoko to attend this wedding. If they'd -

Well. He cuts the thoughts off. They're dead. It'll do no good to think about them.

Eventually, Mellon indicates that she's ready to return, and George stiffly gets off the floor - his body isn't what it used to be, after all. He's beginning to get old, much to his chagrin.

When he comes back to the room, Eryn has also been calmed down, though he is still sniffing as George and Mellon come through the door. As expected, Mellon lurches from George's arms to the floor so she can scurry to Eryn's side, who meets her with wide open arms and a tearful, "*m sorry!*" that's loud enough to shake the mansion.

George joins his family, watching the two kids make up fondly. He has no doubt that Mellon will have to be reminded to be gentle again, probably as soon as tomorrow. She's young, still, and lessons like this are hard to learn with just words. He promises himself to keep a better eye on them tomorrow, or at least assign two babysitters instead of just Tommy.

Karl links arms with George, leaning his head on his shoulder with a heavy sigh.

"The woes of fatherhood," Karl faux-sniffles.

"It's fine, don't be dramatic." George rolls his eyes, shaking his shoulder to shrug Karl off, though he leaves their arms linked. "I had a talk with her about being mean to people. She bit Tubbo today."

Quackity blinks, surprised. "Is he okay?"

“He’s fine.” George shrugs. “It wasn’t too bad. We’ll just have to keep an eye on it, I think. She’ll learn.”

Strong arms hook around George’s middle and Dream leans against his back, his chin over George’s shoulder. “She’s just feeling a lot.”

“I know.” George sighs. *Me, too*, he doesn’t say. He knows they all concur.

The four of them stand together and watch as Mellie and Eryn return to being best friends, as if the last twenty minutes never happened. They quickly find their way to Wilbur, who awkwardly allows them to commandeer his lap so Eryn can bully him into telling them a story.

George takes comfort in the closeness of Dream, Karl, and Quackity; they help to gentle the bitter bite of the empty spot where Sapnap has always been. George doesn’t regret letting Sapnap leave, but he regrets not putting some sort of tracking enchantment on him before he left. If Sapnap thinks he’s going anywhere after he gets back, he’ll be sorely mistaken.

“He’ll be here,” Quackity says suddenly, sounding sure. Like he’d sensed what George was thinking about.

“I know,” George says, hoping it isn’t a lie.

They watch until Mellon and Eryn both fall asleep in Wilbur’s arms. And then they get the pleasure of Wilbur stiffly begging to be rescued, which does *wonders* for brightening George right back up.

George should have known that the true disaster had yet to strike. He should have known, but he’d had the gall to be optimistic and so, when the true disaster comes about, he finds himself somehow shocked despite his usual pessimism.

The day starts okay; not great, because Sapnap is still missing, but okay. Mellon and Eryn are given to Tommy and Philza for safekeeping and Karl corrals Techno, Punz, Sam, Ponk, and Callahan for the hard labor and heavy lifting of putting out the tables and chairs. The wedding is set for sunrise, because that was when Dream and George first saw each other - Bad had suggested that everything be set out the day before and those enchanted tokens be used to keep the food safe and fresh until the post-ceremony breakfast, and it had seemed reasonable at the time to agree.

Jimmy and Chandler and Chris are slathering the last of the limewash over the wood of the gazebo, while Karl and his troupe carefully finish setting out chairs in neat rows - the fancy chairs from the attic front and center. Quackity is directing all other free hands toward finishing up decorating the trees and tables, when George emerges from his flower-filled task. He watches Dream and Skeppy and Bad carefully laying out each of the seven tables they’ve set up around the edge of the small clearing within the orchard, the traditional Kinoko centerpieces garnering appropriate *ooos* and *aahs* as the sunlight reflects off the gems beautifully. George can admit that, despite his disinterest in Kinoko tradition, they’re quite lovely.

George's hands are sore from wrapping the forever flowers, meant as tokens for guests to take if they'd like to remember the occasion. He'd been at work finishing them off all day, having waited until the last possible minute to pull them from their pressings to avoid any accidents, and only now, as the day grows later and the final touches of decorations are done, does he take time to look the orchard over.

George hates to say it, but...it really does look perfect.

The gazebo is masterfully done - Dream had spent enough time and sweat on it that George had begun to grow jealous of the damn thing, but George finds himself admiring the craftsmanship. It's a beautiful spot to say their vows, all dark wood made pale with limewash and a curved roof tiled with un-limewashed dark wood to accent. The chairs have been placed precisely - George has seen Karl move an entire row three times until he'd seemed satisfied. The four fanciest chairs are in the middle of the front row, and George knows that Bad had calligraphed nameplates for each chair: two spots for George's parents, two spots for parents Dream had no memory of. There are nameplates as well for the chairs to either side of these four - three for Sapnap, Karl, and Quackity, and three for Skeppy, Puffy, and Foolish.

There's a table to the side of the gazebo, bigger than all the others, with a perfectly pale blue table-cloth to match the soft blues of the decorations pinned to the trees and chairs; this is the table where the food set to be delivered any minute now will go, with the middle section dedicated to their cake. Around the clearing, a few more circular standing tables have been set up to allow for people to stand and eat as they mingle. Karl and Quackity have set aside a small area to the right of the gazebo where they've left an assortment of instruments - namely a guitar, ukulele, accordion, and flute - with the promise of a few songs during the reception.

After weeks of planning, stress, and sleepless nights, the wedding is nearly set.

The only stopgap, unfortunately, is that Sapnap and Puffy and Foolish have yet to arrive.

"George!" An eagerly expected voice calls and George turns from admiring the orchard to see Tubbo and Ranboo waving with excitement. The relief George feels is palpable. He hadn't told any of the others about the food setback, hoping with everything he had to spare from hoping for Sapnap that the food would be done in time. With only a few hours of daylight left, his hope had come through.

"The food's arrived!" he announces, and he sees Karl and Quackity both snap around, twin expressions of relief on their faces. If George had to guess, the food is the last thing to tick off on Sapnap's meticulous list, which the two of them had practically turned into a holy relic for how they cherished it, checking it nearly every hour as they'd gone through the day.

George finds Dream, who's made his way to the opposite side of the gazebo, and takes a moment to just...appreciate him. There is still stress at the corners of Dream's eyes, but he looks happy. He looks impressed. He looks content as his eyes travel over the orchard and all that's come together over the last few days. He looks as proud of the work as George feels, and that...

It feels good. George lets himself smile.

“Punz, Jimmy,” Bad calls from where he’s fixing some fairy lights in one of the trees, the only one tall enough to reach so high. “Please go get the cake! Have Skeppy follow with the token so we can set it up as soon as the cake is on the table.”

“You got it, Ambassador!” Punz salutes, Jimmy gives a lazy wave, and the two set off toward the house.

“Everyone else, can you go help with the food?” Bad directs. “There’s quite a bit, I’m sure; it’s all coming out here, along with tokens. Take your time so you don’t trip!”

There’s a chorus of agreements and the orchard is soon clear of most of their friends as they disappear toward the mansion. That leaves George, Dream, Bad, and Quackity, as well as Tommy, who’s been left with Mellie and Eryn while Philza no-doubt goes to help direct their well-meaning but chaotic friends.

George glances at the kids and Tommy and finds Mellon and Eryn on top of each other. They’re obviously playing, but George can just see trouble brewing if they aren’t stopped. He’s about to say something when Tommy says, firmly, “Oi, you two! I told you to stop that, you’re goin’ to get yourselves hurt!”

George smiles and leaves Tommy to it, instead focusing on going to help Bad, which is where Quackity has gravitated, too. A quick glance in Dream’s direction finds him carefully inspecting the gazebo, probably looking for imperfections that he’ll want to fix with the last hours of daylight he has before they break for the night.

“Make way!” George hears only a few minutes later - Punz’s voice. “The cake is on the move!”

“We’ve got food incoming!” Karl shouts only a second later. “Right behind ya!”

Quackity claps and someone else whistles in excitement. George would have liked to watch, but he’s focused on what Bad is doing, slowly detangling a few lights from some branches so he can more evenly drape it with George’s help to guide him.

He hears the others coming, the soft thumps of their steps, the gentle prattle of conversation.

Later, he’d look back at this moment and he’d call himself a fool for not watching the entire thing from start to finish - but that’s later, and in the moment, he is distracted by the lights and the slowly-building pride in what he’s helped to accomplish to make Dream’s day the perfect day, just like he’d promised over a decade ago-

“*Stop!*” Tommy suddenly shouts, panic laced into the volume of his cry - and George whips around so hard he stumbles, eyes going wide as he sees Eryn and Mellon racing through the orchard - Mellon is chasing Eryn, gaining quickly, and Eryn ducks between the first and second row of perfectly-laid chairs to get away, Mellon on his heels. Neither of them listen to Tommy, intent on their game of chase, and it’s with mounting horror that George sees what is about to happen mere seconds before it does.

“No!” he shouts, uselessly, as Eryn erupts from the chairs right in front of Punz and Jimmy, neither of whom see the toddlers in time. Eryn, miraculously, makes it across their path before he can be trampled, but Mellon isn’t so lucky. She darts for Eryn and George lurches forward helplessly as he sees Punz stumble over her. Punz shouts in surprise and his foot comes down on the base of Mellon’s tail.

She screams, a pained squeal - and then the entire area around her is filled with ender dragon breath.

George is familiar with her breath - it sparkles and glimmers, a purple smoke that will one day be so powerful that it is all she’ll need to protect the End.

For now, though, it’s only powerful enough to send everything in her immediate area into the fucking sky. George watches, hands outstretched, as Mellon, Eryn, Punz, Jimmy, the cake, the closest half of two rows of chairs, and the largest table are launched into the air by the magic of Mellon’s dragon’s breath.

Eryn shrieks in genuine alarm and suddenly there is a flaming toddler cartwheeling tens of feet in the air and small bursts of flames and ender particles are sparking and raining down from on high.

“Eryn!” Skeppy shouts, having been following Punz and Jimmy, and he is all at once fully decked out in his diamond skin as the breath fades and everything and *everyone* begins to fall from the sky.

Karl, having been empty handed, bolts forward to catch Mellon as she frantically flaps her wings without her magic keeping her up, and he catches her before she can hit the ground. Skeppy leaps into the air with great force, snatching Eryn and all of his flames straight from the sky and holding him close as Eryn screams loud, crying sobs. Punz and Jimmy do not have anyone to catch them - Jimmy lands in a cursing roll and Punz finds himself crashing into the roof of the gazebo - there is a sickening crunch as his not-inconsiderable weight is hurled into the settling tiles.

“The cake!” Someone - perhaps Niki - screams, and George watches, as if in slow motion, as the cake - still holding its tiers as if by sheer force of will - begins to fall back to the ground.

It is Wilbur, surprisingly, who makes the lunge for it. He is, unfortunately, not quite close enough. He manages to catch the bottom of the cake with one hand and - for one queasy moment - George has *hope* -

And then ten chairs *crash* to the ground with the creak and splintering of splitting wood, and the table is not far behind. Wilbur is forced to side step to avoid getting flattened.

The cake wavers, still supported only by Wilbur’s single, outstretched palm - and then tips off.

George watches it hit the ground and this part, at least, is quick. The cake shatters, flowers falling off in icing puddles, cake cracking to reveal the vanilla and chocolate sponge beneath

the decorations, the three tiers separating as they lay in the grass and revealing the thin dowel that had held them together.

Punz rolls off the gazebo with a low groan of pain.

“Fire,” he chokes out as he pushes to his hands and knees, “*Fire!*”

George turns to numbly watch the gazebo. Some of Eryn’s fire must have landed on the roof alongside Punz. They’d decorated it with ribbon, as they’d done the trees, and it must act as fuel because there is smoke and it only grows darker. He sees a small flame beginning on the roof of the gazebo - the walls are limewashed, protected by the crushed lime, but the roof is not.

The gazebo is burning.

“Get a bucket!” Chandler shouts, “Karl, we need that water enchant!”

“O-on it!” George hears Karl yell from where he’s still cradling Mellon on the ground.

George slowly looks around; the chairs are in disarray from the other chairs falling on them. Some have been broken into pieces, including three of the fancy attic chairs. Two of the table legs have split. The cake is destroyed. Punz is cradling one of his arms, Ponk at his side and looking serious. Jimmy is limping where he’s being helped by Chris to one of the chairs. Wilbur is still standing over the cake, staring at it in bewilderment, until Karl hurriedly shoves Mellon into his arms and races to one of the barrels they’d been using to haul decorations to fill it with infinite water. Skeppy is still rocking a wailing Eryn, who’s no longer on fire but is still very scared.

George can’t find Dream at first - and then he thinks to look around and spots him. He’s walking back toward the mansion. He strikes a lonely figure, head bowed and shoulders slumped.

“George,” someone says and George blinks, turns away from Dream’s retreating back to see Quackity looking at him in concern.

“We can -” Quackity starts, but he has to trail off, helpless in the face of so much going so wrong all at once. George can smell smoke.

“I have to...go talk to Dream.” George covers his face with his hands. His eyes are burning, much like the roof of the gazebo he was supposed to be married in tomorrow morning.

“George...” Quackity tries again, soft. George just shakes his head.

“Please, just...save what you can,” George finds himself begging. Quackity nods, silent, and George leaves the ruins of his wedding venue behind to chase after Dream.

Dream doesn’t mean to cry. It’s all just *stuff*, after all. Mellon was okay, Eryn was okay. Punz and Jimmy might be a bit worse for wear but they’re alive. Everything else was just - *stuff*. So Dream shouldn’t be crying. But he is.

Dream curls up tighter in his bed, pulling the blanket over his head and hiding his face in the pillow. It smells like nothing - Dream doesn't usually sleep in this room. It's been practically unused for years, probably since the time when Sapnap's spark was fading.

He doesn't really know why he chose this room to run to. Maybe because he'd known that smelling George would be enough to break him. He'd broken regardless, though, so it had been wasted effort.

The door squeaks softly as it opens, signs of its disuse. Dream doesn't move.

"Dream?" George asks, as if he doesn't know Dream's there.

Dream doesn't answer. The tears are shameful and he doesn't want George to see them. Not over something like *this*.

"Dream," George says, somehow softer. The door closes, but Dream knows that George hasn't left. He hears soft steps and then there is a weight on the mattress as George sits on the edge. "Dream, come on. I...I know it seems bad, but-"

"It's fine." Dream interrupts, muffled.

"Well, I wouldn't say *fine*." George sighs. "It's definitely not the ideal."

"No one's hurt." Dream turns his face to make his voice more clear. "That's all that matters."

George doesn't say anything for a long time and Dream doesn't either; there are still tears, but they've slowed enough that he doesn't have to do much more than rub his face against the pillow every once in a while to get rid of them.

Eventually, George climbs into the bed. He stays above the sheets, just curls his smaller body around Dream's and leans his forehead along Dream's spine. A familiar arm slides over his waist, tugs gently until Dream wriggles back and they fit snugly together with only the sheet to keep them apart.

"You're hurt," George says into the back of his shoulder.

Dream can't respond, choked up. They go back to the silence. It feels violent, almost - a crushing weight on Dream that presses him down harder and harder. It's not anxiety or a flashback like how he sometimes gets - it's a thicker sort of grief.

Dream feels like he's been the crux of every issue that's come to lie at their feet since he and George started planning this wedding. He knows that if it were up to George, they'd have called Bad and had a small little ceremony at the village and filed some paperwork and been done with it. At most, they'd have had something similar to what Sapnap, Karl, and Quackity had - a rowdy dinner with the people they love and a few minutes dedicated to their vows before the party really kicked off. It's because of Dream that there's been all the pomp and circumstance. Because he'd wanted a big, proper wedding with the beautiful decorations and the cake - Dream almost starts crying again just *thinking* about the cake. Dream's the one that's been holding out for something...something that just isn't them. He and George have

never been able to take two steps without *something* trying to trip them up. In this case, it was *literally* someone tripping.

Dream wishes he'd never got his hopes up. He wishes that he'd just agreed to the courthouse wedding and then he and George could have been married and Dream would be content with it, and just continue to have his little fantasies of a wedding he'd been thinking about since he was a child. It's so much worse, being so close, thinking he'd actually...actually get it, only for it to go up in flames.

Dream should get up and go back outside. He should check that Mellon and Eryn really are okay, and make sure Jimmy and Punz didn't break anything, and help put the fire out, and help clean up the broken chairs and table. He should be thanking everyone for their hard work and assuring his guests that it's all fine, really, nothing to be too upset about. He *should*. He knows that he'd have been able to, once. There was a time when he could shift on a dime, when a shake up like this would have rattled him for only a second before he was launching into a new direction, righting the wrongs and building a new plan on the fly. If he was nineteen again, fresh and brave and on top of the world, instead of almost thirty, and piecemealed back together over the last seven years...

Dream curls into a tiny ball and closes his eyes against the harsh burn that refuses to go away.

"Do you ever miss who I was?" Dream finds himself asking. It's an old wound, one he'd let scar over. Occasionally it still twinged, though, as all war wounds do.

"What do you mean?" George asks, and Dream can hear the frown in his voice.

Dream finds himself turning over in George's arms, popping his head out from under the blankets and letting himself rest on the pillow. George is watching him. Dream hadn't bothered closing the curtains and there is still sunlight streaming in, hitting George directly in the face. All George does is tilt his head, squinting so he can see Dream. Without much thought, Dream rests the side of his hand along George's cheekbone, blocking the sunlight from his eyes. He sees how they soften without the glare of the sun forcing a squint and it makes his heart stutter, a whispered *hello* - an echo of the very same whisper he'd felt all those lifetimes ago.

George leans into his touch and Dream can't help but brush a thumb along his cheek, the rough bristle of George's unshaved skin. They'd both hopped out of bed this morning with too much to do and neither of them had bothered to shave.

"I miss when I wasn't-" Dream wrinkles up his nose, scornful. "Like *this*. Reduced to tears over a damn cake and some broken wood."

"Well." George smiles. "It was a very pretty cake."

Dream huffs a quiet chuckle, the tears flooding again all at once. "It *was*."

"Hey." George ducks closer, a frantic hand coming to wipe his tears. "Stop crying, idiot, there's no need for the waterworks."

“I *know*.” Dream tries to do as he’s told, but he keeps seeing the cake just - hovering in the air, seeing the way it plummeted back to the ground with gravity. How it splattered and broke against the dirt.

“I’ll make you a new cake,” George promises, cradling Dream’s face in his palms. “Ten cakes, even!”

“I-it’s not the cake,” Dream confesses, “j-just-” He pauses, takes a deep breath to try to stop the crying and manages to reel it back in, much to George’s obvious relief.

“Just?”

Dream ducks his head again. He needs a minute. George allows him that, slowly drifting a hand up to stroke through his hair. It’s nice. Dream lets his eyes fall shut and basks in the touch until he feels strong enough to continue.

“We don’t have anything from back then,” he says carefully. “In Kinoko. We don’t have...our clothes or our armor or...or any of our books, our *things*. We only have each other, and our swords. You didn’t even get that much.”

“We don’t need anything else,” George says immediately. “I don’t need anything else from Kinoko, Dream. You two are more than enough.”

“It is for me, too.” Dream breathes in shakily. “But I just...I had this, too. This day. I’ve been thinking about the day I finally...I finally marry you since I was *eight*. Twenty years, George. Twenty years of *imagining*. And...and for just a second, it was right there. And now it’s...”

George makes a soft noise.

“I know.” George slowly leans in, kisses Dream’s forehead. “I know, Dream.”

“I’m sorry.” Dream feels his voice fall into a whisper. “I’m sorry, George. It doesn’t matter. None of this *matters*, as long as I still get to marry you, so-”

“Don’t apologize to me.” George leans back to stare at him, eyes fierce. “You’re allowed to be sad.”

“I don’t want to be sad. I - I want to shake this off and just move on and, I dunno, scrape off some of the icing and call it good enough and-”

“Dream,” George interrupts, covering Dream’s lips with his thumb. Dream falls quiet.

“Our wedding,” George says firmly, “is not going to be *good enough*. It is going to be *perfect*.”

Dream tries to speak but George hasn’t removed his thumb and Dream feels trapped by the pad gently tracing his lower lip.

“Maybe I didn’t have little wedding booklets tucked under my pillow as a kid,” George continues, tone still so firm, as if he is trying to imprint his words into Dream’s brain. “But

I've been thinking about this day a lot, too. It's important to me, as well."

"I didn't mean-" Dream flushes, realizing how selfish he's sounded this whole time - but George cuts him off with a tap to his lips again that has him going silent.

George sits up and Dream follows, dazed by the power in George's voice, until George is leaning over him. "I promised you, George says."

Dream can admit that he's always been easy for George to direct; he is endlessly fond of this man and it often manifests in Dream being willing to face any odds for him - including defeating a *god* just to return to his side. Moments like this remind him that, no matter how many years pass, George will always have that control over him. Dream forgets his tears, his disappointment, his embarrassment, as he lays under George, caught up in how beautiful he is as he stares down at Dream. His brows are gently pinched, his eyes dark and serious.

"I promised you that I'd make our wedding exactly what you deserved." George gently cups Dream's jaw, leans down to kiss him gently. Dream feels his breath hitch as he kisses back, but George keeps his kiss light. When he leans back up, Dream follows him in an attempt to keep their lips together. Dream's mouth tingles, his cheeks warm.

"The day isn't over," George declares, determination shining through. "I still have the rest of today and all of tonight to fix this. Don't lose faith in me, okay? I'm going to keep my promise."

Dream blinks. A soft warmth appears in his chest. It rapidly expands, filling his chest and then his gut, dancing up his throat and onto his tongue.

"If you tell me that you'll keep me forever, then that's everything I'd ever need, George," Dream says honestly. "I'm upset about things, but they're just things. I have all I need as long as I have you."

"I'd keep you forever regardless of a wedding," George scoffs, "don't be an idiot, Dream. Death couldn't even keep us apart, *twice*. Do you really think I'd let a few papers and some pretty words do it? No." George pulls a face. "You're mine, Dream. My knight, my lover, my best friend. Forever."

"Of course I am," Dream agrees immediately, that warmth growing into a heat he has no words to describe. The Nether's heat scarred him, shriveled him up - this heat is one he wants to bask in. It's a heat that Dream would happily lay in for eternity, the very same eternity that George promises him with every kiss.

"Of course you are," George reiterates. "That has nothing to do with *this*. This is about a wedding. You deserve to have the wedding you've been dreaming about all this time, and I'm *going* to give it to you because I love you and I promised you I'd make it perfect. Can you trust me for just a little while longer? Let me fix this."

"I-" Dream feels the smile pulling at the corners of his lips, lifting them up shyly. "George."

“Let me.” George kisses him again, harder this time, and Dream relaxes under his touch without hesitation. He lets himself be overwhelmed, kissed until his vision is spotty when he blinks open eyes he hadn’t realized he’d closed. George is still watching him, eyes half-lidded. His cheeks are pink, his hair mussed. Dream carefully untangles his hands from the curls, letting them drop back to the bed in bemused wonder.

“Yes, George,” Dream says weakly. “I trust you.”

George’s smile blooms just like the flowers in the royal garden - bright and lovely and meant only for Dream.

“No more tears.” George pinches Dream’s cheek suddenly, light and teasing, and it makes Dream jump and stutter a protest. But George just pinches his other cheek, too, and pulls lightly until Dream is whining his name and batting at his hands to let his *face* go. Tears are forgotten in the fight to defend himself from George’s merciless pinches.

“Okay!” Dream eventually squeals when George turns his pinches to Dream’s sides, which are much too ticklish for this behavior. “I - I give, George, I g-give, no more tears!”

“That’s what I thought.” George grants him clemency, sitting up properly and leaning on one hand to peer down at Dream smugly. “Defeat is a good look on you, Dream.”

Dream, pouting, covers his head in the sheet again, which only makes George laugh. Dream feels himself boxed in, a familiar mouth pressing a careful kiss to his head through the sheet.

“Also,” George says, voice quite suddenly soft, “to answer your question from before...I love exactly who you are now, Dream. I’ve fallen in love with you three distinct times, you utter imbecile. I’m ruined. Look at what you’ve made of me. A romantic with eyes for no one but the mouthy beanpole who called himself a knight before he’d even mastered the sword.”

“I could beat you plenty,” Dream tries to defend himself, but he’s teary again and his voice waivers - though these tears are entirely different this time.

“You trained six hours a day,” George scoffs, “whilst I was learning *maths*. If you couldn’t beat me, I’d have been concerned.”

“I was learning maths, too!” Dream pulls the sheet down in outrage, only to be kissed again. If George kept doing this, Dream wasn’t going to recover one of these days. George presses him back into the mattress and Dream goes without protest, sighing into the kiss when he feels George settle over him.

They kiss for what feels like one of those eternities Dream’s been promised; neither of them try to take it further than this, just slow, deep kisses that help wring the last of Dream’s anxiety and upset out of his spine. George slides their fingers together at some point, presses their tangled hands above Dream’s head, and Dream can do nothing but be pleasantly aware of how pinned he is. Even if he’s bigger and heavier and stronger in nearly every way, they both know that George is in charge of this moment, and that brings Dream the sort of relief and contentment that a battle-weary soldier might feel at the appearance of a fresh wave of comrades come to join the fight.

Eventually, when their lips are numb and Dream is mostly mush, George sits back. Dream misses his heat immediately, but he does little more than blink owlishly up at him, affection having finally overtaken the stress and uncertainty.

“I have to go,” George says, regret plain as his eyes linger over Dream’s face. “I have a promise to keep.”

“Stay,” Dream tilts his head back, hoping to entice. The way George’s eyes darken tells him it’s worked. Not well enough, unfortunately, because Dream watches George shake his seduction off with a determined sigh.

“Evil.” George smacks Dream’s thigh lightly and forces himself from the mattress, obviously fighting the urge to slide back and crawl under the covers with him. “I’d call you a tease, if I didn’t know you.”

“You’re the tease.” Dream finds himself smiling, stretching his arms out but not bothering to lower them from above his head. If George is truly determined to leave him here all alone in a bed slowly cooling without George there to keep it warm with him, let him at least paint a nice picture for George to keep in his mind’s eye before he goes.

He watches the way George’s eyes drop down his body, appreciation in the gleam of his stare. And then George shakes his head and tears his gaze away with a visible effort.

“No,” George says firmly, “I won’t be distracted. I have a wedding to save.”

“How can I help?” Dream finally gives in to the idea that their moment is over and pulls himself into sitting, preparing himself to get out of bed, too. The light has finally started to fade and it casts the room in a warm glow of sunset orange and shadow.

“By taking a relaxing bath and then going to sleep,” George practically orders. “I want you fresh as a damn daisy tomorrow. Don’t stress about anything else. I’m going to take care of it.”

“That hardly seems fair,” Dream starts, but George cuts him off with a glare that has Dream both shutting the hell up and also pondering if he can somehow convince George to come back to bed with him all at once.

“That’s an order, Sir Dream,” George says imperiously, adopting that royal tone of his that always gets both Dream and Sapnap chortling.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Dream gives a mocking bow of his head, hiding his toothy grin, and he hears George scoff with faux rancor.

George takes his leave without fanfare, though he can’t help but shoot one last look at Dream before he leaves the room. Dream watches him go, love practically oozing from his pores as George gives him a nod before shutting the door behind him.

Dream takes a moment to breathe and then flops back into the mattress, a besotted giggle escaping before he can help himself.

He's going to marry George tomorrow. Maybe he won't have fancy chairs or a big cake and maybe his orchard will be a bit crispy but none of that *matters*, not really. All that matters is that he has George - and that Sapnap is there, too.

The reminder that Sapnap is still missing finally dampens Dream's mood, but only a little. If Dream is going to have faith that George will make their wedding the one from Dream's childhood fantasies, then he can keep faith that Sapnap will make it back in time.

Dream lets himself wallow in the faint tendrils of lust that George had left lightly stoked in his belly, and then he makes himself get up, as ordered.

Dream ends up not taking a bath. He warms up enough water to give himself a scrub down with a wash rag, wipes away the day's sweat, brushes his teeth, and calls it a night.

When he retires to their room, he finds that Karl is reclining on the bed, reading a book.

"Are you my emotional support mercenary tonight?" Dream finds himself asking, though he lets his soft tone steal any bite from the words.

"Somethin' like that." Karl pats the bed next to him. His exhaustion hitting all at once, Dream climbs onto the bed and slides under the sheet. In the summer heat of the Badlands, they only have a light cover on this bed and Dream appreciates how soft it is.

Karl stays sitting up, reading by the light of a candle. It's not enough to bother Dream, who lets his eyes close.

"Is everyone okay?" Dream asks once he is settled.

"Yeah." Karl flips a page gently; it's a familiar backdrop. Dream has fallen asleep to Karl reading a thousand times before and it's easy to feel himself relax. "Mellon and Eryn feel awful, but we made sure they understood that they needed to give you time before they apologize."

"I'm being such a shitty dad," Dream groans, turning his face into the pillow. This time, it smells like him and George. He takes comfort in it.

"No, you aren't." Karl reaches over and ruffles his hair lightly, just enough that Dream feels his touch. "You're having a rough night. Everyone needs a break from their kid sometimes, even when she's as perfect as our Watermelon. Especially after that fiasco."

"So you don't think this is going to scar her for her entire eternity?"

"No, Dream, being upset and needing space while the three other available parents take care of things until you're ready to address what happened with her is not going to scar our daughter for her entire eternity." Karl snorts, amusement plain. "If anything, this is a lesson that both of them need practice in. I don't think either Mellon or Eryn will be playing around in spaces they've been told aren't meant for playing for quite a while."

Dream hums a response, not quite shaking the guilt off. Bad and Skeppy had never needed space when they'd been raising Sapnap, Dream, and George. And Dream vividly remembers

how hard it had been to grow up with the knowledge that Puffy had needed a break from him so bad that she'd fled out to sea. Dream wants to be a parent like Bad and Skeppy. He wants to be nothing like Puffy, as much as he'd idolized her as a kid and loves her now. He never wants Mellon to doubt how much he cares for or wants her or that he'd begrudge her anything.

Dream wants but, unfortunately, he is who he is. And he's learned in the last few years that he's someone who needs time to gather himself, or he can't put his best foot forward. He has to trust that Quackity and George and Karl and the rest of their friends and family can handle Mellon's emotional well-being until he has had time to put his shattered feelings back together and comfort her.

Every day that he is a part of raising Mellon is a day his respect for Bad and Skeppy grows.

Karl turns another page. Between this page and the next, Dream falls asleep.

Dream is on fire when he wakes up; he's sweating so hard because there's a body pressed along his side and it's so hot that it nearly scalds him where bare skin touches bare skin. Dream feels a little bit like he's been put into an oven, with how the heat has been trapped under the thin sheet.

He remembers, brain fuzzy, falling asleep to Karl. This isn't Karl.

"Sapnap." Dream says, sitting up before he's even fully awake. His clothes are damp with sweat and they stick to his skin, shifting uncomfortably as he separates from the bedsheets, but he can barely process that because the heat is familiar, it's been missed for what feels like years, it's -

"*Sapnap*," he repeats, twisting to look and -

Sapnap is there. For a horrid, humid moment, Dream thinks he is a specter, an image conjured up by sleep and wishful thinking, but then Sapnap groans and his closed eyes pinch tighter. He reaches out an arm blindly, slaps it against Dream's torso and then roughly yanks at his shirt until Dream tumbles back to the bed with an *oomph*.

"Shud'p," He slurs, "'m fuckin' sleepin'."

"Wh-when -" Dream stutters, bewildered and elated, "You're home!"

"Course," Sapnap cracks one eye open - in the dim light of a fresh candle, it's bloodshot and there are dark bruises that denote days without enough rest. He looks like he's lost weight and his face is still dust-packed from travel. He's smeared dirt all over the sheets, actually, and some of it has turned almost muddy as it's mixed with Dream's sweat, which is - so fucking gross Dream doesn't even have words. He can't find it in himself to truly care, though, because Sapnap is *home*, and he's talking as if it was only obvious that he'd be here when Dream woke up.

Dream checks the window and sees that there is no light - it's pitch black except for the palest shades of moon. It's the middle of the night, but Dream can hear hustle and bustle on the other side of the door, not exactly loud but not nearly quiet enough that he'd have to strain.

Dream has enough time to process that, and then he's sobbing. There are no tears, not yet, but his breathing is immediately labored and catches in his throat, almost painful in its roughness.

"Oh, Prime," he hears Sapnap say, and then the bed is shifting and Dream is getting pulled into a hug so overheated that it nearly evaporates his sweat. Wherever Sapnap touches him burns, just a little, but Dream finds that he doesn't care.

"It -" he starts, "it was - the chairs - th-the *cake* -"

It's not about the cake, not really, but Dream finds that he's just - he's stuck on the cake. He just pictures what it had looked like, fifteen feet up in the air, still holding to its tiered shape, and then it exploding against the ground, the flowers collapsing in on themselves and the dowel exposed to the world.

If the first person he'd been most upset on behalf of was George - after himself, selfishly - then the second was Sapnap. They'd spent so many nights whispering across their beds to each other about color schemes, decorations, songs, vows, table arrangements, and every other silly minutiae of a wedding, and Sapnap had sacrificed almost a *month* of his life just to fetch Dream's family so Dream could have them here, and he'd written a detailed list after spending just as long as Dream and George had stressing about every task from big to small...and then Dream had let it all go to waste while Sapnap's back was turned.

It's guilt, and it's relief, and it's just *upset*, and it's relief again, as Sapnap holds him.

"I know," Sapnap mumbles, sounding more awake this time. "I fixed it, Dream, stop crying."

"*Fixed* it?" Dream sits back, wiping hard at his face, still puffy from sleep and sweat. "How?"

"Don't worry about it." Sapnap pointedly tugs him back down so they're laying against the bed again, sharing a pillow. Sapnap smells gross - like sweat and traveling - but Dream can't find it in himself to move away. He realizes that he's gripping Sapnap's shirt hard enough that it hurts and forces himself to relax his grip.

"Go to sleep," Sapnap continues, "I'm *tired*."

"But..." Dream lets himself be guided down, but his brain is *on* now, and it feels like there's a rabid cat chasing its own tail in his head. "...What happened? Where've you *been*? Is Patches home?"

"Don't make me tell this story at three in the morning," Sapnap practically begs. "I'll tell you guys all about it at the reception. Patches is *sleeping*, like we should be."

"Did-" Dream cuts himself off with a wince, reeling himself back in. "Puffy?"

"She's dead asleep," Sapnap snuggles into the pillow and pulls the sheet up to his shoulders, looking completely content despite being smeared with dirt. "Like we should be. She'll be ready by tomorrow."

Dream breathes out carefully. His eyes are burning, burning, almost as hot as Sapnap's hands. His heart swells.

She made it. Sapnap is home. Maybe the wedding he'd imagined isn't what will happen at dawn but he'll have exactly everything he needs to make it a wedding he'll be proud of. George at his side, Bad and Skeppy and Puffy and Foolish to watch them wed, Sapnap and Karl and Quackity at his back, Mellon and Eryn within hugging distance. That's all he needs for it to be perfect, really.

"Thank you, Pandas." Dream leans forward, knocks their foreheads together lightly and then doesn't bother pulling away. The closeness is a comfort sorely missed.

"Don't be an idiot," Sapnap grunts, sounding half asleep already. "Sleep."

Dream isn't sure that he'll ever sleep again, honestly. He feels wound up and pulled taut all at once. Like he's only one sharp jerk away from being broken in half.

Sapnap starts snoring almost immediately. Dream closes his eyes and listens to the familiar sounds of his best friend sleeping. Underneath that are the sounds from outside the room. The whole house is still up, it almost sounds like.

Dream feels twinges of guilt - he wants to go out and send everyone to bed. It's been a long day and it seems it'll be a long night, too, unless he intervenes.

He goes to sit up, but Sapnap lugs an arm across his chest the second that Dream starts to move. Dream huffs, amused and also disgusted because Sapnap *smells*, but the weight steals Dream's initiative. As if Dream's body had just needed an anchor to secure him, all of his anxious energy flees his limbs and Dream is left once again exhausted.

He wraps a hand around Sapnap's wrist, intending to push him off, but he finds that his eyes are heavier and heavier with each blink, his muscles relaxing under the familiar heat of Sapnap's spark and the relief of him being back home again.

Mellon will be thrilled.

Dream drifts back to sleep while imagining her excitement.

Dream is forcibly yanked from sleep by the bedroom door flying open and Skeppy's voice booming as he shouts, "*Rise and shine!*"

Dream stares blearily, taking in the bright blue of Skeppy's armor as he stands in the doorway. There is a hilt in Dream's hand - Nightmare. He'd grabbed it on instinct upon being shocked awake. He turns his head and finds that Sapnap is also sitting up, Schlong drawn.

“You two spook so easily,” Skeppy says, stepping into the room. “I remember a time when I had to throw cold water on your heads to wake you up.”

“You never did that,” Dream says groggily as Sapnap groans and flops back onto the mattress. It makes Dream bounce slightly and he carefully sets Nightmare back in its stand, where he leaves his sword most of the time.

“Oh, I didn’t?” Skeppy laughs, coming to sit on the edge of the bed on Dream’s side. He reaches up, armor falling away to reveal his face and hands. He’s smiling so wide it looks painful, eyes shining wetly as he reaches up to grip Dream’s shoulder. “No, I’d just shake you awake.” He jiggles Dream’s shoulder lightly. “You’d pop right up. Pandas, on the other hand...”

“Don’t wake me up,” Sapnap begs, “I’m so tired. Just a little longer.”

“No,” Skeppy denies, “we don’t have time. I need you to go help Dream scrub down while I get his outfit ready. And you need to bathe while you’re at it, you look like something the cat dragged in.”

“I feel like it,” Sapnap sighs, not otherwise moving. Then, all at once, he jolts and sits up so fast Dream flinches for Nightmare again, managing to stop himself only because Skeppy had been holding his hands.

“*You’re getting married!*” Sapnap shouts, louder than Skeppy had, even, and Dream finds himself laughing as the world starts to register properly.

“I’m getting married,” he agrees quietly.

“What are we still doing in bed?” Sapnap practically falls off the mattress trying to roll out of the sheets, but he recovers quickly and rounds the bed to grab Dream’s hands from Skeppy and start yanking them. “We have to get ready!”

“S-Sapnap, calm down,” Dream laughs, letting himself be pulled once Skeppy moves out of the way. He feels grimy from dried dirt and sweat but Sapnap is *here* and that’s well worth the need to take a very thorough bath.

“No!” Sapnap gets him through the door and down the hall to the bathroom and Dream can’t find it in himself to try and slow him down. It’s the morning of Dream’s wedding. Yesterday had been a bust but, in the face of knowing that he’ll be *George’s* within the next two hours... none of that matters to him anymore. Whatever is about to happen will happen but, in the end, Dream will be married to George, and Sapnap, Karl, and Quackity will be at his side, and Mellon will be theirs, the five of them, and he’ll have his family. Dream can’t imagine a wedding more perfect than that.

In the redstone-activated light of the bathroom, Dream takes a second to look Sapnap over properly. He looks rough; his cheeks are a bit sunken in and his scruff is nearly a full beard and his eyes are still bruised underneath, but his gaze is bright and excited and his mouth is set in a wide grin as he leans over the tub. It’s slow-going but the bath does fill. Usually, they

need to stoke the furnace to get warm water but Sapnap just plunges both hands in and it's steaming in a matter of seconds. Dream's skin prickles at the sight.

It isn't often that they bathe together anymore, but they're long used to it after years of living and traveling together. Dream peels his thin pajamas off and leaves them in a pile and helps Sapnap yank himself out of his travel clothes, and then they carefully submerge themselves in the tub together.

The heat is perfect. Dream finds himself going lax, leaning his head back and sighing. The tub isn't tiny, but it's certainly not big enough to comfortably fit two adult men, and he and Sapnap have to stay slightly curled for this to work. But Dream doesn't mind.

"Come're." Sapnap smacks his thigh lightly and Dream cracks an eye and offers his arm when Sapnap makes a *gimme* motion. Sapnap immediately takes a rag to his skin, starting at his hand - which tickles - and moving his way up.

Dream finds himself smiling. "I'm capable of bathing myself."

"Shut up." Sapnap sends him a short glare. "I've left getting George ready to Karl and Quackity and kept the hardest job to myself. You just sit there and don't make this difficult."

"But-"

"Just let me, dude," Sapnap practically whines, "it's our wedding."

"Our?" Dream grins, letting Sapnap take his other arm to scrub down, too.

"Yes, *our*. I've spent just as long waiting for this as you! Longer than George, even!"

"Okay, okay," Dream gives in, allowing Sapnap to bully him into turning around so he can dump steaming water over his head with a bowl. There's not much talking after that. Dream lets Sapnap wash his hair, tilting his head back to help when necessary. Sapnap helps him wash off the dirt and sweat from the night. It's the most in-depth bath Dream has taken in a long time. It's over relatively quickly, though, and Dream is soon stepping out and drying off while Sapnap gives himself a quick scrub down.

"Let me." Dream smacks Sapnap's hands away and uses his own prune fingers to wash Sapnap's hair for him, too. He carefully pours water afterwards to get the suds out and Sapnap sits still, eyes closed and head tilted for Dream. His brows pinch, lips downturned.

"I know you don't want a thank you," Dream says, using the fact that Sapnap can't talk without getting water in his mouth to his advantage. "But none of this would be happening if it weren't for you, Pandas. You made this possible for us."

Sapnap grumbles, but Dream sees how his cheeks flush and he doesn't think it has to do with the hot water.

Sapnap doesn't move his head once Dream has slicked the water out of his hair, and Dream gives him a minute. Sapnap eventually opens his eyes, staring up at Dream from a nearly upside down angle, that pinch still in his brow, which only adds to his serious sincerity.

"There was a time where all I could think about was that I'd never get to have this day," Sapnap says. Dream sees his throat bob as he swallows and Dream feels his own airway tighten with sympathy.

"I thought you were dead, and I thought I'd lost George. I thought I'd never have a *home* again, let alone get to see you two married. But you came back to us. We built a new home together. We have Mellon, and each other. And the dream we talked about for so long is finally coming true."

"It is," Dream says, and suddenly all he wants is to see George. To hold him and laugh with him. He wants to tangle their fingers together and squeeze his hand.

Sapnap watches him and Dream watches back, and they both end up with matching smiles.

The quiet solitude of the morning gives them peace to appreciate. Peace is a hard concept for any of them to truly be comfortable in, especially with a little dragon around, but Dream allows himself to revel in that discomfort for now. He enjoys the quiet, the still-dark sky outside, the dim redstone lamps, the steaming water, his best friend smiling up at him.

"Can you tell me what took you so long now?" Dream asks eventually, and Sapnap sighs, almost explosive in his annoyance.

"The *walls* were closed," Sapnap scoffs, "So I had to *sneak into Pandora* and *find them* and then *sneak us all out* like I was some sort of fucking spy! And *then* there was a massive *storm* that absolutely *ruined* the roads, Dream, it was a fucking nightmare! We had to cut through a forest and I'm pretty sure I whacked enough branches to build an entire fence around Quackity's garden just to get us through it, for *fuck's* sake -"

Dream smiles, listening as Sapnap vents and Dream carefully double checks him for missed dirt. Eventually, there's a soft knock at the door.

"I have your things," Skeppy says through the wood, and Dream breathes in and out slowly, exhaling to release any tension. Sapnap gets out of the bath while Dream goes to the door, a towel around his waist.

Skeppy is waiting in the hall, piles of clothes in either hand. Dream lets him in and Skeppy attends them both in dressing up. Dream considers asking Skeppy what the new plan for the day is, but decides that it doesn't matter, so long as it ends with Dream and George together. Instead, he stays quiet.

Neither of them had wanted anything fancy - just formal enough to match the decorations. Dream and George had both had their tuxedos tailored in the village by Mister Nook's son, an aspiring tailor. The tuxes were simple - just black jackets and matching pants. George had chosen a pale blue vest and matching bowtie. In a deliberate choice, Dream had chosen a cool mint green for his accent, perhaps as a kindness to a version of him that would not be standing at George's side in this ceremony, but who had loved George just as fiercely, as fully, as Dream still does.

They'd chosen smoky-gray suits for Sapnap, Karl, and Quackity, and they'd each picked colors of their own for their vests - a soft orange for Sapnap, a lilac purple for Karl, and a darker blue for Quackity. Dream watches Sapnap button his vest over a white dress shirt and realizes that it's the fanciest outfit he's seen Sapnap in since before the Kinoko coup.

"It looks good," Dream says when Sapnap eyes himself doubtfully in the mirror.

"Thanks." Sapnap must find appeasement because he turns away to look at Dream. Dream sees his eyes soften as Skeppy straightens out Dream's jacket and smooths the lapels down.

"Now hair," Skeppy says and marches them both back to Dream's room. He sets Sapnap down in front of the mirror first and takes a brush and comb to the unruly locks, gathers them up and pins them away from his face through a handful of bobby-pins and sheer determination. When he's done, Sapnap looks fit for a wedding, though still wincing from his father's merciless brush, and he stands up the second Skeppy seems done with him.

Dream is next and he sits nervously, watching Skeppy through the mirror as he looks Dream's hair over critically and then takes a comb to it.

Like Sapnap, Dream gets his hair pinned back so it's out of his face. He hasn't cut it in awhile and it's long enough to be tied back, leaving a little tail, a few wayward curls managing to escape. Skeppy leaves them, so they must look okay.

Skeppy had remained calm, if a bit manic, since he'd woken them up. It's as he finally sets the brush down and looks at Dream in the mirror that the mask breaks and he inhales sharply in what could be a sob.

"My boy," Skeppy's voice cracks. "I finally get to see all my boys married."

"Took 'em long enough," Sapnap sniffs, and Dream can only smile.

He looks at himself in the mirror. His hair and tux look nice. He looks healthy - a few extra pounds giving his face a softer touch, his eyes bright and happy, his scars healed. His sight had never fully recovered - one of his eyes is and always will be much weaker than the other, especially as he ages - but the slight blur doesn't take away from the fact that he looks *happy*.

"Can we go now?" he asks, looking back at Skeppy. He can see the sky beginning to lighten, a telltale sign that the sun is soon to rise.

"We'd better." Sapnap stands from the edge of the bed, where he'd been resting. "And if they didn't do exactly what I told them to do, they'd better hope they're fireproof."

As Sapnap speaks, a few flickering flames appear at his fingertips, dancing lightly across the surface of his skin before dissipating in a soft furl of smoke.

"Wait until after the vows to avenge your wedding plans," Skeppy warns, but he can't stop smiling anymore than Dream can, so the threat doesn't carry much weight.

They take only a couple minutes more to finish primping. Skeppy drops his armor and reveals his own suit - pale blue all over to match his armor, paired with a black dress shirt -

and Dream has just a moment to appreciate it before he and Sapnap are being ushered out of the room.

The mansion is quiet except for settling creaks as they make their way out and onto the front lawn. Dream sticks close to Sapnap, whose heat chases away the morning chill. Together, they all head for the orchard, where Dream can see the glow of fairy lights in the trees. The sky is beginning to purple, casting the palest and wateriest of lights across the land.

It's by the rising sun and the lights in the trees that Dream sees what awaits him.

The chairs have been fixed. Each row is neatly laid out again and filled with a person, all of whom are quietly talking amongst themselves. Dream can see the fancy chairs in the front - one leans a bit, but otherwise he wouldn't have been able to tell at all that it had been crushed by gravity the day before. A new table has been set up, slightly smaller than the last but serving its purpose - it's filled with neatly organized trays and plates of food, a smaller table nearby with cups and drink pitchers. In the middle of the table is a simple, white cake. It has two layers, slightly wonky but standing up, and it's covered in amateur attempts at icing flowers, including long, thin stems and bright red blobs for petals along the sides. Dream wants to take a closer look, heart swelling, but his attention is caught by the gazebo - or, more accurately, the people standing in front of it.

The gazebo itself had managed to be saved. The roof has been painted a dark black, as if using ship's varnish, probably to hide any singe marks or damage, but it otherwise looks as if it was mostly untouched by any fire. Standing before the gazebo are Karl and Quackity. Karl keeps checking his wrist, foot tapping, looking nervous until he glances up and sees them. Quackity - standing next to him and rocking a catnapping, suited-up Eryn in his arms - notices them just before Karl, and his grin widens enough to hurt.

Within the gazebo are Bad and George. Bad is talking, practically glowing as he speaks, and George has ducked his head but seems pleased to hear whatever Bad is saying. In George's arms, Mellie is resting calmly. She's been wrapped up in some pink ribbons, a little bow around her neck and some fun streamers that fall along her back, and she looks *adorable*. Dream wants to whisk her into his arms and apologize for being so distant.

Instead, he reaches down and grabs Sapnap's hand.

"Ready?" Sapnap asks when they've reached the trees. By now, their presence has been noticed and the entire orchard's worth of people have turned to stare at Dream. When Dream looks out across the sea of beloved faces, he spots two that immediately send him frantic waves for attention.

Puffy and Foolish stand out amongst the crowd despite themselves. Fashion on the high seas is a bit difficult, but they've both obviously made an effort - Foolish has acquired a slightly mismatched suit that he is pulling off without a problem, and Puffy has found herself a lovely dress made of what Dream can only assume is silk from one nautical conquest or another.

Dream waves at them, too, the undercurrent of excitement and all the eyes watching him nearly overwhelming.

He can't stop looking at George. He looks...

Dream tries to exhale again but his breath is caught.

George looks like himself; he's wearing his tuxedo, blue bowtie knotted at the base of his throat, vest and jacket buttoned. When Dream was young, he'd imagined George in a royal outfit - something pompous and bright, like what his father had worn in paintings of his wedding to George's mom - but Dream finds that he much prefers how reality has shaken out. There are no thick capes or shiny crowns, no scepters or red carpets. It's just...George, exactly as he is. Exactly who Dream loves.

Bad has a hold on George's shoulders, stopping him from turning around as Dream approaches. But Mellon is watching him with wide eyes, her entire tail swaying slowly and her wings spreading wider and wider the closer he gets.

Dream finds himself blinking back tears already, the sight of his daughter and his soon-to-be husband - his king - too much to bear without at least tearing up.

"Bad, just let me *look*," George whines as Dream gets close enough to hear, "everyone else has!"

Bad laughs, bright and happy, smiling at Dream with all his teeth.

"Are you ready, Dream?" Bad asks and Dream starts nodding before he's even finished the question.

"Yes, yes." Dream rocks forward on his toes, just managing to stop himself from falling into George and Mellon, only Sappnap's grip on the base of his jacket holding him back.

George twists in Bad's arms at his voice, eyes going wide as he finds Dream and stares.

Dream feels himself heat under the look, a flush taking over his cheeks and a smile dragging his lips up. "George," he says, barely a sound and more of a *feeling*.

"Dream." George drops his eyes down and then back up, taking Dream in. "You look... good."

"Yeah?" Dream can't stop the giddy laugh. "Thank you. You also look good."

George nods dumbly, eyes still wide and on Dream. He's settled on Dream's face, at least. Part of Dream wants to shift, wants to turn his shoulders in and shrink away. He doesn't. He lets George stare, even as he feels himself go red. He tries to hold George's gaze, tries to be brave, but George always wins these contests. Dream gets too flustered and looks at Mellon instead.

She's wriggled around in George's soft grip, a low chirping sound with a lifted end that he recognizes as a question.

He's barely lifted his arms when she launches herself at him with a keen and he manages to catch her with both arms, pulling her into a tight hug. She shoves her head along his face, the

ridges of her eyes jammed against his jawline, her tail wrapping around his arm and her little claws gripping at his shirt. Despite her excitement, he notices that she's careful not to rip it.

"Hi, baby," Dream says, just for her, turning his face into her and kissing the top of her head. "You look beautiful."

She grumbles, a low purr that wracks her body.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," Dream says, wanting to reassure her. "Are you okay?"

She nods, preening under his attention as he scratches her flank gently, her wings flexing in contentment. Dream feels relief, powerful and deep, that she doesn't seem to be holding any lingering pain or resentment about yesterday. He'll check in more fully later - probably tomorrow, once the excitement has died down and he can talk with her properly.

For now, he feels a careful tap at his shoulder. When he turns, Sapnap is there, hands expectant and eyes soft and fond.

"Come're, Mels," Sapnap says. "Let's get this show started before we miss the sunrise."

She seems torn between Dream and Sapnap for just a second, but ultimately acquiesces with a low grumble that sounds more complaining than purring. Dream is hesitant to let her go, too, but he does, because Sapnap is right and they have a tight schedule to keep.

George is still staring at him.

"What?" Dream frowns, reaching up to wipe at his cheek where Mellon had pressed her face. "Did she leave a mark?"

"No." George reaches up, brushes the tips of his fingers along Dream's cheek and then drops his hand. "You're just - ugh. It's awful."

"You said I looked good!"

"You do, it's fucking awful!"

"George!"

"It's not fair." George frowns, reaching up with both hands this time. He squeezes Dream's cheeks together, forcing his lips to pucker. "How dare you look this good at six-fifteen in the morning, this is witchcraft."

"Wha'," Dream protests, "'s no'!"

"Ugh." George wrinkles up his nose, but Dream spies the smile teasing at his mouth. "At least I get to marry you. That makes it palatable."

"Speaking of." Bad claps. "Shall we begin?"

“Yes,” George says immediately, not letting go of Dream’s face. Dream tugs gently at his wrists but George doesn’t let up and Dream can’t bring himself to make him so they just stand in front of Bad, George squeezing Dream’s face and Dream letting him, holding his wrists gently.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dream sees Sapnap retire to the chairs with Skeppy, Karl, and Quackity. Eryn is awake now, and he and Mellon both settle into laps. Next to Skeppy, on the other side of the four empty chairs, Puffy and Foolish are staring at them with rapt attention. Puffy is crying, tears flowing freely without any care or concern.

Dream forces himself to look back at George, not able to handle that at the moment. George hasn’t broken his gaze from Dream’s face. He looks as if he’s been gifted a great wonder, instead of just looking at the same features - with a few bonus scars and wrinkles - that he’s been staring at for nearly two decades.

Bad begins the ceremony with one more clap. “Welcome!” He strengthens his voice so it booms out to reach the farthest chairs, where Karl’s guild has set up alongside a few villagers Dream and George have become friends with. Dream spots the baker, looking haggard but happy, next to the cobbler, her husband, both Nooks and their son, and a few of the village children who Dream had taken to teaching the sword on weekends.

“Today, as the sun rises,” Bad says, “we’ve gathered here to experience something truly special alongside two of our dear friends. Does anyone object to this union?”

Dream trusts Sapnap to put a stop to any joke-attempts to object. Instead, he focuses on George as George’s grip on his cheeks gentle and his hands slowly drop. Dream doesn’t let go of George’s wrists and their hands fall to land between them. George twists their fingers together to tangle them and Dream lets him, feeling his entire body settle into the moment.

“Then we’ll proceed,” Bad says when no objections are forthcoming. “Who’d like to go first?”

“Me,” George says a split-second before Dream manages to, a smug smirk taking over his face when he realizes he’d won their unsaid contest.

Dream does his best not to pout, knowing there are twenty-plus people watching him.

“Go on, then,” Bad encourages, shaking his head fondly at their antics.

George loses the smirk, shifting on his feet. Dream feels his hands tense and relax, squeezing Dream’s fingers with hidden nerves. He opens his mouth, but nothing comes out for a solid ten seconds.

“George?” Dream whispers, checking in. “You okay?”

George nods jerkily, closing his mouth with a click of his teeth. The sun has begun to rise properly now and Dream has to take a moment to appreciate how it touches George’s face - warm oranges and pinks, blooming sunlight that catches the planes of George’s handsome face.

It's like he's a young child again, with the most beautiful boy he's ever seen in his life right in front of him. It's like he's falling in love all over again.

"I don't remember the first time you told me you love me," George says, just loud enough to be heard.

Dream's breath catches as George starts to talk, listening intently. He's had his vows written since he was nine, but he wants to know what George has been thinking about - if he's going off the cuff like Sapnap did, or if he had something planned.

"I don't remember, because you said it so often, or showed it." George drops his eyes and then snaps them back up to Dream's, as if he couldn't stand the idea of not looking at him. "Even back then. When we first met for real and you offered me your hand. You never let me go after that moment. I thought you just had a crush, or it was some sort of hero worship. A little bean pole following me around, spouting off about being my knight. I don't remember, because you did it so often that it just became... a part of my life. Of course you loved me. You packed my favorite foods and learned my favorite songs and snuck out with me to sword fight or shoot at the range or - or anything, really. I can't remember a time when you told me 'no' and meant it." George laughs. His voice breaks. Dream watches him, unable to tear his eyes away - no more able to do it now than he's ever been able to.

"I remember when I realized I loved you back, though." George clears his throat, his voice rough. "The sort of love that wasn't just between friends. Or a prince and his knight. The sort of love that meant I'd do crazy, absolutely wild things for you - *that* kind of love. I'd decided to go on a little walk around the far side of the castle. I didn't even know you'd followed me, I thought I was all alone. Some two-bit bandits tried to *mug* me! I was incensed, the nerve of them to try something like that right outside my own castle! And I was going to give them a piece of my mind along with all the gold in my pockets when you were suddenly there, Nightmare in hand, and you'd chased them off before I could even fully realize what was going on."

Dream laughs despite himself, remembering the moment. He'd been - just past eighteen, still fresh to having a real netherite sword. He'd seen George sneaking around and hoped to scare him out in the woods to teach him a lesson about sneaking off without Dream or Sapnap - only to end up scaring off three idiot ne'er-do-wells looking for trouble on the outskirts of the castle where no one ever really went.

"You looked so proud of yourself." George blinks, and then has to blink again and again, rapid bats of his lashes as his eyes grow wet. Dream is enraptured, his heart hammering. "You turned around with your silly little glowing sword and your smug little smile and I felt like I was going to throw up all over my shoes. Stop smiling, idiot."

"I'm not smiling." Dream whispers, smiling.

George reaches up and covers Dream's mouth with a hand, and Dream lets him without complaint.

"*Anyway*. I remember that day. I thought I was alone, but I wasn't, because you were there. You were *always* there, you and Sapnap. Even...even when you were in hell, you fought to

come back to me. Even when you were suffering, you danced with me. Even when you were hurting and angry and - and -” George has to stop and take a deep breath. Tears slip free and Dream is too shocked to react for a solid moment - and then he’s wiping at George’s cheeks, both of them giggling through tears with each other -

“Gods, Dream!” George says, half sobbing, half laughing. “You - you’ve always been-”

“Take your time,” Bad says when George chokes up again.

George does, taking a few seconds to compose himself.

“This is humiliating,” George announces, and their crowd titters. Dream hears quite a few snuffles hidden in the laughter.

“You’ve always been mine,” George says, quieter, once he’s managed to get himself together again. Dream nods, because he’s right. “My knight, my hero, my champion, my advisor, my best friend. Neither Death nor Life could keep us apart, and they both tried pretty damn hard.”

“Nothing could keep me from you,” Dream can’t help but say, tears wetting his hand where he’s cupping George’s jaw.

“I know.” George laughs, bright and loud. “I know, Dream. Nothing could keep me from you, either. Take my memories and I’ll just fall in love with you all over again. Take my life and I’ll snatch the key that brings me back to you. Make me king and I’ll throw the crown away to live as a hermit with you. It’s always you, isn’t it? It’s always you.”

George bows his head, heavy under the weight of his words. Dream hugs him, blocking anyone’s view of George in his vulnerability. George allows it, clinging tightly to Dream’s shirt for just a moment more.

George eventually pulls back when he’s calmed down, his cheeks still pink from the tears.

“It’s always been you,” he repeats. “I couldn’t ask for any more.” His eyes slide to Sapnap and Karl and Quackity and Mellon, all watching raptly. “Though we’re lucky enough to have it all the same.”

“King George I,” Bad intones when George doesn’t continue, “Once and Last King of Kinoko Kingdom, you are promising to uphold the bond that you create with your partner tonight. To support him and respect him for the rest of your lives together. You make this promise in front of your friends and family. Do you swear?”

“I swear.” George cradles the back of Dream’s hand on his jaw, his palm burning, his eyes warm in the beaming morning light.

“Dream?” Bad prompts. “Would you please give your vows?”

“I love you.” Dream says immediately. A loud roar of laughter ripples across the crowd, but Dream can’t find a hint of embarrassment in himself.

George smiles and Dream feels like he's going to explode.

"I remember the first time I realized it," Dream says. "I was lost in the garden and I saw you. You were holding a flower and the sun was rising. I felt my entire life shift right then. I knew that I'd never find anything or anyone that I'd devote myself to as wholly as I would to you. You're-"

Dream tries to search for a word. This part had never come to him; words that would totally capture what George is to him.

"You're my prince. My king. My reason to keep fighting, my hero. You've saved me more times than I can count, more times than I can say. You've rescued me, you've pulled me from the deepest pits of hell. You've never let go of my hand. I couldn't have begged the world for a more perfect life than I've built with you and our family. I love you."

Dream is surprised to find that he isn't crying - not because he doesn't want to, but because he'd been so focused on making sure that George felt the sincerity in every single word he'd spoken, the gratefulness and the devotion, that he'd forgotten to cry.

Dream swallows roughly. "I love you," he says. "You were the one to teach me what those words meant, and you remind me of the meaning every day."

"Sir Dream," Bad says, "First Knight of Kinoko Kingdom, you are promising to uphold the bond that you create with your partner tonight. To support him and respect him for the rest of your lives together. You make this promise in front of your friends and family. Do you swear?"

"I swear." Dream says the words, but he can't hear himself. He's too busy watching George, the incredulousness of the moment rushing through his veins. Twenty years, he'd dreamed of this moment, and it's finally happening.

"The Council of Leadership recognizes your union and blesses it on behalf of Kinoko Kingdom. The Pandora Council recognizes your union and blesses it on behalf of the Badlands. Under the authority of both councils, you are wed."

"*Now kiss!*" Puffy shouts from the crowd. Dream thought he'd be the one to kiss George but George yanks him down first, their lips mashing in a rough, laughing kiss that Dream quickly reacts to. He pushes down and George allows it, allows Dream to wrap an arm around his waist and bend him backward in a dip that has wolf whistles and shouts echoing between the trees of the orchard.

They're married.

"We're married," Dream says against George's lips. "George, George, we're *married*."

"Mhm." George kisses him again, and then again, then the corner of his mouth, and then his cheek, his temple. "You're my husband. My mom is rolling in her grave, wherever it is."

“George!” Dream gasps, shocked at the joke but unable to hide his snort of disbelieving mirth, and it sets George off into a fit of laughter.

“Married!” Karl shrieks, and then he lands on them in a pile of limbs and shouting, Sapnap’s war cry the only warning before he joins them, sending all four of them down to the ground at Bad’s feet.

“Married!” Sapnap sobs, crying so hard that he’s not breathing properly. “Y-you’re-”

“Breathe, Sap,” Quackity says, not unkindly, as he stands over them with Mellon perched around his shoulders, staring down at them all with a raised brow.

“What are you doing up there?” George raises a brow right back, “Too good for the pile, Q?”

“I’ve got the baby,” Quackity tries to defend, motioning to Mellon. Dream, hugging both Karl and Sapnap as they cry into his shoulders, scoffs loudly.

“It’s our wedding day,” Dream bargains, simpering, and that does the trick.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Quackity sighs, but he’s laughing as he lets himself get yanked into the pile, Mellon shrieking in excitement as she goes down with him.

“How did you manage this?” Dream asks against George’s temple. He hasn’t brought himself to let go of George since they untangled themselves from the ground and cut the cake to kick off breakfast for their guests, and George hasn’t elbowed him off yet, either.

The cake itself has been cut but Dream is still admiring the bits that are left. Looking more closely, it’s easy to see where Karl had assisted the baker, who’d apparently been dragged from the village to make a new cake as soon as George had had a moment to spare. Karl had helped with decorations and his flowers were slightly off-kilter and the stems were a bit angular but Dream loved each one with all of his heart. He’d taken a mental picture to doodle for his own memories before they’d cut the first piece. It tasted delicious, the icing perfect and the cake itself chocolatey and robust.

Everyone is eating, standing around the tables and enjoying the crisp summer morning. Dream hears a familiar laugh and glances to his left, where he finds Puffy and Skeppy arm-wrestling, Foolish and Sam hyping Puffy while Punz, Niki, and Ponk cheer Skeppy on. Bad is sitting innocently at the table, no doubt having instigated the wrestling match in the first place.

Dream smiles, his cheeks aching from how wide his grin is. He hasn’t had a chance to see Puffy yet but he’s happy to see her and Foolish both.

“I didn’t do much.” George shrugs, leaning into Dream’s chest. “Mostly I just threatened them with your tears and held the pieces of the chairs together for a few hours until the wood glue dried. Sapnap’s the one who whirled in at dusk, half-dead and covered in grime and snapping orders like the Chief Advisor.”

“Don’t downplay it.” Dream hides his face in George’s hair - it’s kind of crunchy with some sort of gel to keep the curls in place, but Dream doesn’t mind. “You both fixed everything while I was being dramatic.”

“That’s our job.” George shrugs again. “And in exchange, you fix things while *we’re* being dramatic. A match made in hell.”

“Technically, we’re a match made in the Nether,” Dream says thoughtfully, and it’s George’s turn to gasp in outrage at the low joke, elbowing Dream hard in the ribs - just not hard enough to get him to actually let go.

“We don’t use that word,” George says. “Not today, of all days. The last thing we need is the Empress showing up pissed because her invite got lost in the mail.”

Dream muffles a half-hysterical giggle in George’s hair, shoulders shaking.

“If only you hadn’t tried to kill Nightmare with the only portal we know the location of,” Dream says, faux-wistful. “Alas.”

“Alas,” George agrees dryly.

“Hey, lovebirds!” Karl shouts, drawing their attention. He’s standing under the shade of the gazebo, a flute in hand. Next to him, Quackity has his guitar and he’s plucking at the strings, adjusting the tuning. “Come have a dance! We’ve prepared quite the number for you.”

“We’ve bastardized a Kinoko waltz,” Quackity corrects, but he looks excited and proud, and Dream can’t resist the allure of whatever song they’re offering. He looks at George, finds that George is already looking back at him.

“Will you dance with me?” Dream asks, already drifting toward the gazebo, hands beseeching.

George doesn’t have to answer; his grip on Dream doesn’t lesson as he follows him toward the music.

Dancing with George has always been something special. Dream can remember long afternoons tucked away in abandoned rooms, the two of them learning steps together to every dance they could remember from the balls and parties they’d attended. George would memorize both parts of the dances he was taught just so he could teach Dream and they could run them together, Dream humming the music and George miming the foot work as necessary. George would skip lessons and Dream would skip training and they’d spend the hours just dancing together.

Dream had imagined dancing with George while he was in the Nether. Those years are practically gone from his memory now - they’d started to fade almost as soon as XD had died and Dream was back to himself. Now he only remembers that it had been hot, and it had *hurt*, and that dangerous creatures had withered a patch of skin on his arm that never quite healed. But Dream can’t forget the dancing. Alone in dark rooms, hidden for a brief moment from the terror of the place he’d been stolen to, slow dancing with his eyes closed and imagining

George in his arms, matching him step for step, demanding that Dream hum a tune to match their feet.

Dream isn't in the Nether, now. He'll never go back there, he knows. And he has George in his arms even as he thinks about those times when he didn't.

They dance, Quackity's classical guitar and Karl's joyful flute painting a cheerful waltz that has the two of them twirling around the little dance area, laughing themselves silly. It's a familiar song - a Kinoko waltz, as Karl had claimed. Dream remembers the tune quick enough and hums along, the steps coming easily to both of them. Dream tries to throw George off with a distant memory of a step but George meets him without hesitation and introduces his own half-forgotten step for Dream to navigate. It's *fun*, and it has them breathless.

Sapnap and Punz join them within minutes, awkwardly rocking back and forth - dancing more for the joke of it than any particular desire to dance, but it opens the floor to others. Soon everyone is dancing to Karl and Quackity's gift to them, and Dream is holding George close so as to not lose him in the crowd.

"May I have this dance?" Someone asks once the waltz ends and a new tune - this time on the accordion and guitar - begins. Dream looks around and finds Puffy, a slightly nervous tilt to her head as she studies Dream and George.

"Oh." George hesitates, looking at Dream. Dream nods lightly and George lets him go, stepping back with a gentleman's bow. "Of course, Captain."

"My thanks." Puffy gives a joking curtsy and then offers Dream a hand. He takes it after a moment's hesitation, and then the two of them are off in a slightly stilted twirling dance to match the mood of the accordion.

"You made it." Dream says as they spin around the dance floor, three other pairs mirroring their moves around them.

"Of course." Puffy laughs. "How could I miss this? We've only been waiting twenty years!"

"It was worth it." Dream takes the teasing good-naturedly. It's taken long years, and lots of letters, but he and Puffy have reached a place where Dream is content. He might never be able to let go of all of the pain from his past with her, but he's been able to let go of enough to want her at his wedding. And he's relieved that she's made it; that he got to share this moment with her and Foolish.

Later, after the festivities have died down, he's going to introduce her to Mellon properly, as a grandmother, to his daughter. He's going to try to get all the tears out before then so he doesn't cry, but he doesn't have high hopes for emotional stoicism at/in a moment like that.

"It was," Puffy agrees. "For what it's worth, Dream, I am...*so* proud of you. Both of you. All of you. The life you've built..."

Dream twirls her, as the song demands, and Puffy goes easily. Then they snap apart and suddenly Niki is in his arms, and she's laughing madly, with delight.

"Dream!" she shouts.

"Niki!" he shouts back, his heart soaring.

"Congratulations!" She twists with him, her hair flying out around her. "You're married!"

"I am!" He finds himself laughing alongside her. "Thanks for coming!"

"Of course!" Niki squeezes his hand. "As if I'd miss the day we've been waiting for for so long!"

And then they're twirling apart again and Puffy is back.

"It's something special, Dream," Puffy continues as if she'd never left. "Don't let it go, not for anything."

"Not for all the gold in the world or fish in the sea," Dream promises without thought. He knows to his core that there will never be anything in existence that he could want more than the five of them and their daughter in this house, living the life they've built with the people they've come to call their family.

Puffy leans up as the song ends and kisses his cheek. "That's my boy."

She leaves him soon after, another dance starting up and Niki snagging Puffy to cause some dancing drama. Dream lets them go, content to reunite with his husband and get some water, maybe. He marvels at the thought - his *husband*. He's married. He's married to *George*.

He finds George - his *husband*! - at the food table, Wilbur next to him, and the aura around them is just...awkward. As Dream approaches, confusion warring with suspicion, Wilbur beats a sudden and hasty retreat, disappearing into the crowd toward his family, where Mellon has somehow convinced Tommy and Technoblade to have a *Who Can Throw The Dragon Higher* contest.

"What was that about?" Dream asks, eyebrows raised, as he joins George. George offers him a small glass of lemonade and Dream takes it gratefully. He scans the crowd; finds Sapnap and Skeppy arm-wrestling, Skeppy still undefeated, and Karl and Quackity still performing, Mellon in the arms of her uncles, Eryn contentedly sitting atop Bad's shoulders as Bad, Foolish, and half of Karl's guild chow down on what look like dried peppers from the store room. Other guests are dancing or eating *regular* food, much to his relief.

"Wilbur just apologized for his hand in murdering my parents," George says casually. Dream chokes on his lemonade.

"*What?*" He coughs, pounding his chest hard to help clear his airway. "Hello!"

"Yeah, I have no idea, either." George shrugs. Dream gives him a careful once-over, concerned, but George doesn't seem all that bothered. He steals Dream's lemonade and takes

a small sip.

“He said he’s had a few years to think things through and if he could go back and change things, he would. I told him his problem was always that he never fully committed to the bit.”

“Prime.” Dream pinches his nose. “He committed plenty, actually. That was the problem, I think.”

“Maybe.” George shrugs and then leans against Dream’s side. “I dunno. It seems useless, either way. I forgive him or I don’t, what really changes?”

“Nothing.” Dream drops an arm around George’s shoulder. They’ve both long-since ditched their jackets and unbuttoned their vests. Dream lost his bowtie about an hour ago and George’s is askew and half undone. Dream thinks they must make a pretty picture. He makes a note to doodle that later, too.

“I told him if he could figure out what Schlatt did with their bodies, I’d forgive him.”

Dream doesn’t respond to that, just pulling George closer to his side.

“He seems different,” George goes on after a short moment. “Don’t take this to mean that I’m defending Wilbur Soot, but he seems less...Wilbur Soot-y.”

“Like how?”

“Well.” George frowns thoughtfully. “I can’t remember the last time I heard him apologize and sound like he meant it.”

“Hm,” Dream hums. “Maybe Mellon has been good for him.”

“And that time he got absolutely dashed into the rocks by Quackity. I think that did wonders for his ego, too.”

“Good times.”

“Not particularly.” George snorts and Dream finds himself smiling despite the heavy subject matter, unable to keep the dour expression in the face of George’s amusement, dark as it is.

“No,” Dream agrees. “I’d much rather focus on the *now* times, actually.”

“That, my queen, is a very good idea.”

“Oh, so I managed to snag the title?” Dream turns to George properly, leaning down for a chaste kiss, “And here I thought I’d marry for love alone.”

“I’d have given you a kingdom, if I thought you’d appreciate the gesture.” George wraps his arms around Dream’s neck and pulls him down for a slower, proper kiss. George hums, the sound turning more earthy when Dream pulls him closer.

“I’d appreciate anything you gave me,” Dream says honestly. “Your kingdom, your heart, your hand, your body, your temper, your demands, your love. I’d bear the entire world and then some for you, if only you asked.”

“Would you, sweet talker?” George leans up to reach Dream’s ear and drops his voice into a whisper. “I’ll ask only one impossible task of you today, since it’s our wedding day, after all.”

“Speak it,” Dream says, mouth dry.

“Run away with me.” George ghosts a kiss to his cheek. “A very early start to our wedding night.”

“Truly an impossible task.” Dream swallows, hands flexing on George’s hips. “Sapnap would assemble a search party. They’d find us before we shared more than an illicit kiss or three.”

“That doesn’t sound like our Pandas,” George scoffs, breathing warm on Dream’s ear and sending a shiver down his spine. “He’d want us to have a good wedding day. He’d encourage bad behavior, even.”

“Sneaking away for a mid-morning delight was not in the agenda,” Dream protests, but he’s already looking around to see who’s watching them. The coast is clear, most people distracted by the dancing or the crying guild members hacking up peppers while Bad smirks at them.

“Come on,” George encourages, tempting, “It’ll be like when we were silly kids skipping lessons to make out in closets.”

“...Where would we go?”

“There’s an entire forest,” George prompts him. “You love to get lost in it to spite us on manhunts, don’t you? Surely you’ve got a few good spots to hide in.”

Dream hesitates, biting his lip. He needs to make the decision now, before they lose their chance.

George kisses him, soft and sweet.

“You’re a horrible influence,” Dream mutters against George’s kiss, feeling his resolve shatter. “You’ve not changed at *all*.”

“Nope,” George says smugly, rocking back to the flats of his feet.

Dream shoots the wedding party one last look. And then he grabs George’s hand and casually slips them deeper into the orchard, using the trees as cover to hide their escape.

They’re careful not to leave any evidence behind, avoiding breaking any branches or pressing any grass. Dream might be more used to running through the forest like this, intent on staying hidden, but George is no slouch when it comes to shirking his duties. They make a good team; Dream holds a branch out of the way for George and George carefully untangles

Dream's vest from a thorn bush when he gets stuck. Together, they make their way into the surrounding forest in the hopes of catching a few moments of privacy

Dream is sure that he's going to get an earful about it from someone at some point, but he finds that - with the promise of George's hand in his keeping him distracted - he can't find it within himself to care too deeply.

"We should roleplay that time," George says thoughtfully, their fingers tangled loosely between them as Dream leads him through the trees.

"That time I saved you?"

"Yeah," George confirms, "I should have kissed you. It would have saved us that whole mess with the Snowchester princess and shit."

"I would have accidentally stabbed myself with Nightmare if the boy of my dreams kissed me after I saved him from bandits, George. I was but a lad, unprepared for the seductive nature you kept hidden."

"Oh, sure, *I'm* the seducer. You walk around without a shirt most days but I'm the one causing problems in pants-

"*George!*" Dream turns around to smack his arm, laughing at George's predominant pout. "Fine, we can roleplay me saving you from bandits. Are you still a prince and me a knight?"

"My favorite game," George bats his lashes dramatically, "We should mix it up. Maybe you're the prince this time."

Dream blinks, thinks about it, and then gets dizzy with how hot his face goes.

"For Prime's sake," George laughs, teasing and fond all at once, "You're so repressed. Come here."

George pulls him down for another kiss and Dream goes without protest. He's happy for George to call him whatever he wants to, so long as Dream gets kissed like this after he does it.

Dream feels himself get backed up against a tree, George's hands finding his hips and then running along his sides, one up to his ribs and the other down to his outer thigh. Dream drapes his arms over George's shoulders and curls one around his head to pull him closer, mouth going soft so George can deepen their connection.

George presses closer, their bodies aligning, the rough bark that bites into Dream's back a pleasant parallel to the soft warmth of George's front against his. One of George's hands lands on Dream's belt and Dream's breathing hitches, sparks of warmth setting off in his belly.

A twig breaks. Dream's eyes snap open and that's all the warning either of them get before there is a bleating, flying End Guardian careening down from the sky and directly on top of them.

The three of them crash to the forest floor, not unlike earlier when Karl had taken them both down.

“Mellon!” George squeaks, face bright red from their kiss, hair mussed from Dream’s hands running through the curls. Dream shoves his face into the damp grass, thinking of the most disgusting images his brain can muster - wet bread, boiled toes, Nightmare after George gets a hold of it -

“Well, well, well,” a familiar voice drawls, “if it isn’t our missing grooms.”

“Sapnap,” George says like a curse.

“George,” Sapnap replies sweetly. “You didn’t think I’d forget, did you? Because I sure do remember *my* wedding night.”

“You son of a-” George starts, but Mellon squeals, flapping her wings wildly in excitement. Dream looks up from where the grass has been making friends with his face to find Mellon flapping around in big circles, Sapnap standing with his arms crossed and a smug expression not too far away. Quackity and Karl are both leaning to either side of him, twin smirks on their faces.

“I thought you two were playing music.” Dream says, slightly miserable.

“What, and miss making sure that our stars make it back in time?” Karl scoffs. “We passed our instruments off to some willing hands and tagged along to retrieve the runaway grooms.”

“Besides,” Quackity motions with a grin. “Mellon wanted to congratulate you both on a beautiful ceremony.”

“We couldn’t have done it without you.” Dream says, forcing himself to sit up from his sprawl on the ground. George is already standing again, dusting off of twigs and leaves. He offers a hand and Dream takes it, brushing his own clothes off, too.

“No trouble at all.” Quackity shrugs, catching Mellon as she divebombs again, stumbling a bit only for Sapnap to catch his elbow and steady them both. “Now.” Quackity looks them both over, amused and critical all at once. “Come back to the party. You had us all there at daybreak so you’re staying at *least* until noon, or so help me...”

“*Noon?*” George complains, “But Quackity! It’s our *wedding!*”

“It *was* your wedding,” Karl corrects, stepping between them and hooking his arms through theirs. “*Now*, it’s a reception. Come along, my friends, we have a party to host!”

Dream should be annoyed, but he can’t find it in himself to be anything other than amused. He laughs, adjusting his arm in Karl’s and grabbing Sapnap as soon as they pass close enough to force him into the links. George, getting the idea, snatches Quackity up, too, and wrestles him into joining their disjointed, awkward, shuffling chain.

“Not what I had in mind.” Quackity sighs, but he doesn’t fight it and that’s good enough for Dream.

“Me, either,” George complains, though Dream can hear the laughter bubbling behind the words.

Sapnap claps, echoing his dad from earlier in the day. “No whining. We have a reception, and then a lunch, and then there’s the dinner tonight, and then-”

“One thing at a time!” Karl interrupts. Mellon has grown bored in Quackity’s arms and clambers onto his shoulders, only to then pick her way across all of them in a casual back and forth, nearly overbalancing each person as she travels across them “I’m sensitive to plans, my heart, you know that!”

“Enough, enough,” Dream cuts in before Sapnap can say anything back, his heart full and happy all the way to his core in this moment. “You can bicker all you want when we’re back, but you’re scaring away all the wild life!”

It’s enough to settle any arguments for the moment, though Dream knows it won’t be for long. He enjoys the peace while he has it - the forest is beautiful in full summer bloom, and George is whispering with Quackity, which never bodes well for anyone, and Sapnap and Karl are to either side of him and Mellon has settled with her warm, scaled body around his shoulders and neck and -

And walking in this forest with these people and their daughter, heading toward their friends and family, Dream knows that he is home.

Chapter End Notes

An explanation for our baby's name, because I've been holding on to this secret for MONTHS

Hannah once called this our lord of the rings, to wtsd's the hobbit.

The End Dragon is the End's heir's companion, their 'friend' if you will. Wilbur's friend :D

In tolkien's elvish, friend is "mellon" and mel, in tolkien's elvish, is love.

<3

End Notes

Check out our socials here! [hannah](#), [bramble patch](#)!)

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